

# behaviors

How to respond when  
dementia causes  
unpredictable behaviors



## How should I handle erratic behaviors?

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Alzheimer's disease and other dementias can cause a person to act in different and unpredictable ways. Some individuals with Alzheimer's become anxious or aggressive. Others repeat certain questions or gestures. Many misinterpret what they hear.

These types of reactions can lead to misunderstanding, frustration and tension, particularly between the person with dementia and the caregiver. It is important to understand that the person is not trying to be difficult and that all behavior is communication.



## Behavior may be related to:

### › Physical pain or discomfort

Illnesses, medication, hunger or thirst.

### › Overstimulation

Loud noises or a busy environment.

### › Unfamiliar surroundings

New places or the inability to recognize home.

### › Complicated tasks

Difficulty with activities or chores.

### › Frustrating interactions

Inability to communicate effectively, fear, sadness, or anxiety.

## The Alzheimer's Association offers suggestions for handling behaviors, such as:

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## **Use this three-step approach to help identify common behaviors and their causes:**

### **1. Examine the behavior**

- › What was the behavior? Was it harmful to the individual or others?
- › What happened just before the behavior occurred? Did something trigger it?
- › What happened immediately after the behavior occurred? How did you react?
- › Could something be causing the person pain?
- › Consult a physician to identify any causes related to medications or illness.

### **2. Explore potential solutions**

- › What are the needs of the person with dementia? Are they being met?
- › Can adapting the surroundings comfort the person?
- › How can you change your reaction or your approach to the behavior? Are you responding in a calm and supportive way?

### **3. Try different responses**

- › Did your new response help?
- › Do you need to explore other potential causes and solutions? If so, what can you do differently?

# 1. aggression

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Aggressive behaviors may be verbal (shouting, name calling) or physical (hitting, pushing). These behaviors can occur suddenly, with no apparent reason, or can result from a frustrating situation. Whatever the case, it is important to try to understand what is causing the person to become angry or upset.

## **How to respond:**

### **Rule out pain as the cause of the behavior**

Pain can cause a person with dementia to act aggressively.

### **Try to identify the immediate cause**

Think about what happened right before the reaction that may have triggered the behavior.

### **Focus on feelings, not facts**

Rather than focusing on specific details, consider the person's emotions. Look for the feelings behind the words or actions.

### **Don't get upset**

Be positive and reassuring. Speak slowly in a soft tone.

### **Limit distractions**

Examine the person's surroundings and adapt them to avoid other similar situations.

### **Try a relaxing activity**

Use music, massage or exercise to help soothe the person.

### **Shift the focus to another activity**

The immediate situation or activity may have unintentionally caused the aggressive response. Try something different.

## 2. anxiety or agitation

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People with dementia can become upset for reasons that may be difficult to understand. It can help to learn what tends to trigger this response by looking at the person's surroundings, the time of day, what has just occurred, and evaluating potential sources of pain, hunger, need for sleep and sudden changes that may have occurred.

### **How to respond:**

#### **Check for pain**

Pain can often trigger anxiety or agitation. Pain can result from being in an uncomfortable situation, injury, medication reactions or a urinary tract infection.

#### **Listen to the frustration**

Find out what may be causing the anxiety and try to understand.

#### **Provide reassurance**

Use calming phrases. Let the individual know you are there.

#### **Involve the person in activities**

Try using art, music or other activities to help engage the person so he or she can relax and be distracted from anxiety.

#### **Modify the environment**

Decrease noise and distractions or relocate.

#### **Find outlets for energy**

The person may be looking for something to do. Take a walk or go for a car ride.

## 3. confusion

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A person with Alzheimer's may not recognize familiar people, places or things. He or she may forget relationships, call family members by other names or become confused about where home is. The purpose of common items, such as a pen or fork may also be forgotten. These situations are difficult for caregivers and require patience and understanding.

### **How to respond:**

#### **Stay calm**

Although being called by a different name or not being recognized can be painful, try not to make your hurt apparent.

#### **Respond with a brief explanation**

Don't overwhelm the person with lengthy statements and reasons. Instead, clarify with a simple explanation.

#### **Show photos and other reminders**

Use photographs and other thought-provoking items to remind the person of important relationships and places.

#### **Offer corrections as suggestions**

Avoid explanations that sound like scolding. Try "I thought it was a fork," or "I think he is your grandson Peter."

#### **Try not to take it personally**

Remember, Alzheimer's disease causes your friend or family member to forget, but your support and understanding will continue to be appreciated.





## 4. repetition

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A person with Alzheimer's may do or say something over and over again — like repeating a word, question or activity. In most cases, he or she is probably looking for comfort, security and familiarity.

The person may also pace or undo what has just been done. These actions are rarely harmful to the person with Alzheimer's but can be stressful for the caregiver.

### **How to respond:**

#### **Look for a reason behind the repetition**

Try to find out if there is a specific cause or trigger for the behavior.

#### **Focus on the emotion, not the behavior**

Rather than reacting to what the person is doing, respond to how he or she is feeling.

#### **Turn the action or behavior into an activity**

If the person is rubbing his or her hand across the table, provide a cloth and ask for help with dusting.

#### **Stay calm, and be patient**

Reassure the person with a calm voice and gentle touch.

#### **Provide an answer**

Give the person the answer that he or she is looking for, even if you have to repeat it several times. It may help to write it down and post it in a prominent location.

#### **Engage the person in an activity**

The individual may simply be bored and need something to do. Provide structure and engage the person in a pleasant activity such as taking a walk or working on a puzzle together.



### **Use memory aids**

If the person asks the same questions over and over, offer reminders that are meaningful to the individual like notes, clocks, calendars or photographs.

### **Accept the behavior, and work with it**

If it isn't harmful, don't worry about it. Find ways to work with it.

## 5. suspicion

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Memory loss and confusion may cause a person with Alzheimer's to perceive things in new, unusual ways. Individuals may become suspicious of those around them, even accusing others of theft, infidelity or other improper behavior. Sometimes a person may also misinterpret what he or she sees and hears.

### **How to respond:**

#### **Don't take offense**

Listen to what is troubling the person and try to understand that reality. Then be reassuring, respond to the feeling and let the person know you care.

#### **Don't argue or try to convince**

Allow the individual to express ideas. Acknowledge his or her opinions.

#### **Offer a simple answer**

Share your thoughts with the individual, but keep it simple. Don't overwhelm the person with lengthy explanations or reasons.

#### **Switch the focus to another activity**

Engage the individual in an activity or ask for help with a chore.

#### **Duplicate any lost items**

If the person often searches for a specific item, have several available. For example, if the individual is always looking for his or her wallet, purchase two of the same kind.



## Create a comprehensive safety plan

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For more information about dementia and safety, visit the Alzheimer's Association Safety Center at [alz.org/safety](https://www.alz.org/safety).

## 6. wandering and getting lost

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It's common for a person with dementia to wander and/or become lost. In fact, more than 60 percent of individuals with Alzheimer's will wander at some point. They may try to go home when already there or attempt to recreate a familiar routine, such as going to school or work.

### **How to respond:**

#### **Encourage activity**

Keeping the person with Alzheimer's active and engaged will discourage wandering behavior by reducing anxiety and restlessness. Involve the person in daily activities such as doing dishes, folding laundry or preparing dinner. And if the person shows interest in getting out of the house, consider safe outdoor activities such as an accompanied walk or gardening.

#### **Inform others**

Make sure friends, family and neighbors know that the person has Alzheimer's and that wandering may occur.

#### **Make the home safe**

Install deadbolt or slide-bolt locks on exterior doors and limit access to potentially dangerous areas. Never lock the person with dementia in a home unsupervised.

#### **Consider signing up for a location-management service**

MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return® is a 24-hour, nationwide emergency response service for individuals with dementia who wander or have a medical emergency. Alzheimer's Association Comfort Zone® is a Web application that allows family members to monitor a person's location. Call **800.272.3900** or visit **alz.org/safety** to learn more about these services.

## 7. trouble with sleep

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People with dementia may have problems sleeping or experience changes in their sleep schedule. Scientists don't completely understand why these sleep disturbances occur. As with changes in memory and behavior, sleep changes somehow result from the impact of Alzheimer's on the brain.

### **How to respond:**

#### **Make a comfortable environment**

The person's sleeping area should be at a comfortable temperature. Provide nightlights and other ways to keep the person safe, such as appropriate door and window locks. Discourage watching television during periods of wakefulness at night.

#### **Maintain a schedule**

As much as possible, encourage the person with dementia to adhere to a regular routine of meals, waking up and going to bed. This may help him or her to sleep more restfully at night.

#### **Talk to a doctor**

Discuss sleep disturbances with a doctor to help identify causes and possible solutions. Most experts encourage the use of non-drug measures rather than medication.

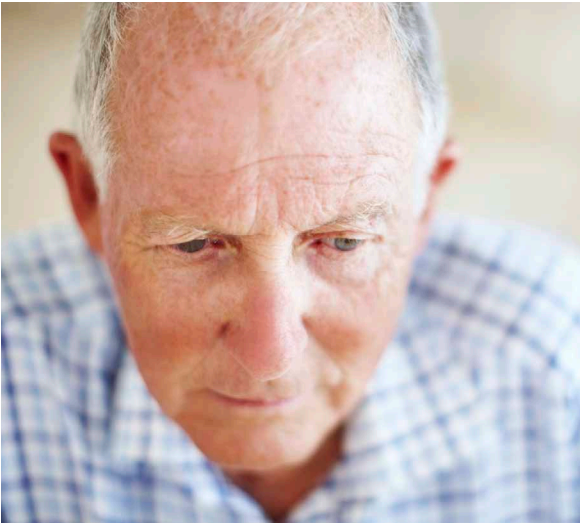
#### **Avoid stimulants**

Alcohol, caffeine and nicotine can all affect ability to sleep. Avoid them as much as possible to promote better sleep at night.

## 10 quick tips responding to behaviors

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- 1** Remain flexible, patient and calm.
- 2** Explore pain as a trigger.
- 3** Respond to the emotion, not the behavior.
- 4** Don't argue or try to convince.
- 5** Use memory aids.
- 6** Acknowledge requests and respond to them.
- 7** Look for the reasons behind each behavior.
- 8** Consult a physician to identify any causes related to medications or illness.
- 9** Don't take the behavior personally.
- 10** Share your experiences with others.





[alz.org/care](http://alz.org/care)

The Alzheimer's and Dementia Caregiver Center provides more than 70 pages of information and easy access to resources, such as:

- ▶ Alzheimer's Navigator™ — create customized action plans.
- ▶ Community Resource Finder — find local resources.
- ▶ ALZConnected® — connect with other caregivers and family members who can relate to your situation.
- ▶ Care Team Calendar — coordinate caregiving responsibilities among family and friends.
- ▶ Safety Center — access information and resources for safety inside and outside the home, wandering and getting lost, and dementia and driving.



**800.272.3900**

24/7 Helpline — available all day, every day.

## alzheimer's association®

The Alzheimer's Association is the world's leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer's care, support and research. Our mission is to eliminate Alzheimer's disease through the advancement of research; to provide and enhance care and support for all affected; and to reduce the risk of dementia through the promotion of brain health.

**Our vision is a world without Alzheimer's®.**

**800.272.3900 | [alz.org](http://alz.org)**

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