

Anger / Frustration and Dementia

It can be very frustrating for the person with Alzheimer's disease or another dementia as they experience changes in their abilities. Feelings of loss of control and building frustration combined with the physical changes caused by the disease may cause the person to have emotional reactions to situations. The best approach is to identify and prevent the triggers that cause these reactions.

Potential Causes

Physical Environment

Often the physical environment can be a contributing factor to a person's emotional reactions. Clutter, over stimulation and poor sensory environments can be confusing, adding to a person's frustration.

Psychosocial Environment

Sometimes, the approach of care providers can contribute to a person's accumulating frustration. Focusing on the illness and loss, expecting too much or too little, not adjusting tasks to the person's abilities and poor communication skills on the part of the caregiver can have an effect on the person's self image.

Internal Environment

A person with a dementia is experiencing physical changes that affect his or her ability to communicate effectively. The inability to understand or express the presence of physical discomforts such as pain, effects of medication, needing to use the bathroom and fatigue may cause the person to react in other ways.

Prevention

- Be aware of factors in the physical, psychosocial or internal environment that may be potential triggers.
- Adapt verbal and nonverbal communication skills to the needs of the person.
- Find ways to allow the person with dementia to express him or herself. Meaningful activities, support groups, home activity programs and day programs are available options.
- Maintain a daily routine.

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FACT sheet

Responding to Anger/Frustration

- Always approach the person from the front, speak to the person before touching him/her and make sure the person has a way out if they become upset.
- Only one person should intervene. More than one person may increase the person's anxiety, which may make him/her angry.
- Stay calm. Eliminate all other noise in the room. Keep your voice low and use simple directions.
- Explain what you are going to do before you do it.
- Use distraction; change the subject.
- If the person says no, take a deep breath, walk away and come back in 2 or 3 minutes. Then try again as if it were the first time. It sometimes works the second time.
- If you feel you are in danger, protect yourself by leaving the room and calling for help.

Additional Considerations

- Sometimes all that is needed is to acknowledge how the person is feeling.
- A person with dementia may sense if you are feeling anxious or frustrated. In turn, they may become anxious or frustrated.
- If a situation continues it may be helpful to speak to the person's physician about treatments that may be appropriate.
- Episodes of extreme emotional reactions can leave a caregiver with feelings of guilt, remorse or sadness. It may help to talk to someone who has had similar experiences and understands. The Alzheimer Society HELPLINE, Education and Support Meetings are available to help.

The Alzheimer Society of Manitoba's mission is to alleviate the individual, family and social consequences of Alzheimer's disease and related disorders while supporting the search for a cure.

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