

Coping with Behaviors in Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia

Part 1 — Recognizing symptoms & general strategies

Alzheimer's disease and related dementias are often accompanied by a host of behavioral symptoms that can be distressing to caregivers. These symptoms, termed **Neuropsychiatric symptoms**, often progress or worsen as the disease progresses. Examples of these symptoms are listed below:

● Recognizing Neuropsychiatric Symptoms

- **Anxiety:** Excessive worry. This can often manifest as repeated questioning: "Where is my purse?" This may progress to the stage where someone is unable to focus on other things.
- **Mood Changes:** Feeling more depressed with behaviors like isolation, loss of interest in activities or hobbies, and feeling down all the time.
- **Agitation/Irritability/Outbursts:** Verbal or physical lashing out at others that can include things like cussing, vulgar statements, threats, kicking, punching, and pushing.
- **Sleep Changes and Sundowning:** Sleeping in shorter spurts throughout the day and night with frequent awakenings is common. "Sundowning" refers to an increase in confusion or cognitive problems around the time the sun goes down and is a common symptom of dementia.
- **Delusions:** False fixed beliefs that are not based in reality. Common examples include that a spouse is cheating, a family member is attempting to steal, or that home is not home.
- **Hallucinations:** Seeing or hearing things that are not real. Examples may include seeing or hearing family members that are not actually present in the moment.

All of the above symptoms can be extremely distressing for caregivers as they are often the first individuals to notice these things. As such, caregivers can take certain measures to protect themselves and their family members from these behaviors per the Alzheimer's Association:

● General Protective Strategies

- **Keep the environment consistent.** Changes in environment like a move, hospitalization, or new caregiver can be stressful. Minimize these changes as much as is possible.
- **Monitor comfort.** Check for things like pain, constipation, hunger, fatigue, and skin irritation as discomfort can contribute to any of the above behaviors.
- **Avoid confrontation.** Do not contradict or challenge your loved one as this can often lead to worsening behaviors. For example, if a person with dementia wants to visit a deceased parent, do not remind them that person has passed away. Instead, you could say: "Your mother is a wonderful person. I wish I could see her too."
- **Redirect.** If agitated or upset, direct your loved one to something that typically helps calm them.
- **Maintain safety.** If there is physical agitation, remove yourself from the environment and remove any potentially dangerous items. Even if you cannot leave your loved one alone, you can move to another room or a different part of the same room.
- **Do not take these behaviors personally.** Your loved one is operating with reduced brain power and impaired communication skills — the above behaviors may be the only way they can currently communicate distress. Share your experiences with others.

When in doubt: talk to your healthcare provider. Physical illness can contribute to any of the above symptoms and often treating the underlying illness improves the above behaviors. Particularly if a symptom or behavior starts very suddenly, this can be a sign of underlying illness. Additionally, individuals with dementia may be unable to fully communicate other signs and symptoms of physical illness.