

Coping with Behaviors in Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia

Part 2 — Specific strategies by symptom

Strategies to address symptoms:

● **Anxiety, Depression, Irritability & Agitation**

- **Keep the environment calm.** Loud noises and bright lights can often be stressful.
- **Music therapy.** Music has been shown to help calm individuals with dementia, particularly if the music is tailored to them from childhood or teenage years.
- **Exercise.** Walking, particularly outside, if possible. Restlessness or excess energy is often associated with the above symptoms, so using some of that energy can help calm.
- **Break down complex tasks into easy steps.** Rather than “fill out this paper form,” ask to fill out one line of the form at a time.
- **Validate and Reassure.** Acknowledge your loved one’s frustration and remind them they are ok—they are safe and you are present with them. Ask them how you can help. Give them “either or” options if they are overwhelmed: “Would you like ice cream OR a cookie?”
- **Modify Hobbies.** Changing previously enjoyed activities to current cognitive abilities. For example, instead of reading a novel, read a short poem or story together.
- **Encourage socialization.** Reduce isolation by incorporating social engagement with friends, family, or social groups.
- **Quality Sleep.** Implement a bedtime routine and sleep hygiene such as a consistent bedtime, reduced screens, limit day time naps, and avoid heavy meals close to bedtime.
- **Predictable Routine.** Creating a predictable routine such as consistent mealtimes, self care routine, sleep times, and familiar activities can help reduce anxiety and irritability and provide comfort.

Coping with Behaviors in Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia

Part 3 — Specific strategies by symptom

Strategies to address symptoms:

● Verbal & Physical Aggression

Prevention

- **Keep the environment calm.** Loud noises and bright lights can often be stressful.
- **Speak simply.** No multipart questions or statements. One question or statement at a time. Soft, calm voice.
- **Monitor your own emotions.** Loved ones with dementia can still pick up on your emotional state—if they sense you are stressed, they may respond with stress. Give yourself a break if you feel stressed, anxious, or irritated.

Responding to Aggression

- **Identify any precipitating events.** Did something happen that contributed to this? If so, how do we avoid it in the future? Is your loved one experiencing pain or discomfort that has not been addressed?
- **Stay calm.** If you are calm, your loved one is more likely to be calm as well. No sudden movements, yelling, negativity, or blaming your loved one. As best you can maintain a positive tone, soft voice.
- **Distract.** Identify an activity that calms your loved one and work towards this.
- **Ask for help.** If you are unable to maintain safety for yourself or a loved one, call 911. Inform them your loved one has dementia and that agitation or aggression are symptoms of dementia.
- **Take a break.** Assuming your loved one is in a safe place, give yourself some time to breath and recover.

● Apathy

- Engage your loved one in their previous interests and hobbies.
- Set up an activity and help the patient participate.

Engagement in formal occupational therapy:

1. **Animal assisted activities:** interacting with animals or a stuffed animal can gently improve attention and engagement.
2. **Music Therapy:** play a familiar song or music to your loved one.
3. **Reminiscence Therapy:** using prompts such as photographs, notes, or personal objects to discuss past events.
4. **Exercise:** try to incorporate stretching, walking, gentle exercise during your loved one's routine.

5. **Cognitive Stimulation Therapy:** engage your loved one in brain re-orientation activities such as puzzles or activities with repetitive motions such as folding clothes.

6. **Multisensory Stimulation:** controlled soothing environments such as aromatherapy, soothing sounds, and ambient lighting can reduce stress and improve engagement.