

Layton Aging & Alzheimer's Disease Center

Behavior Symptoms

Oregon Health & Science University
3181 SW Sam Jackson Park Road, CR-131
Portland, OR 97239-3098
503.494.6976

People with dementia may experience episodes of restlessness, irritability, or aggression. These behaviors can be stressful for family members, and can make caregiving significantly more difficult. It is important to realize that anger and agitation are often symptoms of dementia and are not deliberate behaviors. The following are some coping strategies.

PAIN OR DISCOMFORT

- Make sure the person is not in physical pain or discomfort.
- Rule out medical or physiologic causes such as infection, fever, side effects of medications, impaired vision or hearing, or fatigue.

FRUSTRATION

- Consider possible sources of frustration, such as difficulty dressing or performing other previously simple tasks.
- Divide tasks into manageable steps, and be prepared to step in when help is needed.

BE OBSERVANT

- Note the circumstances of agitation.
- What was happening immediately before the episode? Who was present?
- Which responses were helpful, and which only made the patient more upset?

DISTRACTIONS

- Distract the person with a favorite food or soothing activity.
- If necessary, try again later with the activity that caused the agitation.

CONSISTENCY

- Keep the daily routine as consistent as possible. For some people with dementia, unexpected changes can be confusing and upsetting.
- Try having meals, baths, and other activities at the same time every day.

- Allow time for the person to adjust to changes in the schedule.
- Pace activity times with restful, quiet times to avoid excess stimulation or fatigue.

ANGER

- Try not to express anger or impatience verbally or physically.
- Avoid pushing or restraining the person to get them to do what you want.
- Try to maintain a calm, reassuring tone.
- Give praise and attention when the person isn't restless or agitated to reinforce good behavior.

ENVIRONMENT

- Simplify the environment when performing a task with the person.
- Reduce clutter and background noise. For example, turn off the television.
- Keep furniture in the same place.

STAY IN CONTROL

- Despite best efforts, there may be times when the person becomes restless or agitated.
- Assess the situation. Leave the room if you are unable to calm the person or feel yourself getting angry.
- Have a plan for obtaining help if you sense that you or the person are in danger.