

# BEHAVIORS

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HOW TO RESPOND WHEN DEMENTIA  
CAUSES UNPREDICTABLE BEHAVIORS



## ALZHEIMER'S AND DEMENTIA-RELATED BEHAVIORS

Alzheimer's and other dementias can cause people to act in different and unpredictable ways. Some individuals 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 living with dementia and his or her caregiver. It's important to understand that the person is not trying to be difficult and the behavior can be a form of communication.





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# 1. IDENTIFY BEHAVIORS

The following three-step approach can help you identify common dementia-related behaviors and their causes.

## 1. Examine the behavior

- » What was the behavior? Was it harmful?
- » Did something trigger it?
- » What happened immediately after?
- » Could something be causing the person pain?
- » Could this be related to medications or illness? Consult a physician to be sure.

## 2. Explore potential solutions

- » Are the person's needs being met?
- » Can adapting the surroundings comfort the person?
- » How can you change your reaction or approach?

## 3. Try different responses

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

# 2. ANGER AND AGGRESSION

Aggressive behavior may be verbal (shouting, name calling) or physical (hitting, pushing). It's important to try to figure out what's causing the anger and try to prevent it from happening, when possible.

## HOW TO RESPOND:

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

Pain can trigger aggressive behavior for a person living with dementia.



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

Think about what happened right before and whether it may have triggered the behavior.

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

Look for the feelings behind the words or actions.

### **Try not to 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**

If a situation or activity causes an aggressive response, try something different.

### **Speak calmly**

Using a calm tone, try to reassure the person.



## Take a break

If the person is in a safe environment and you are able, walk away and take a moment for yourself.

## Ensure safety

Make sure you and the person are safe. If he or she is unable to calm down, seek assistance from others. Always call 911 in emergency situations. If you do call 911, make sure to tell responders the person is living with dementia, which may cause them to act aggressively.

## DEMENTIA-RELATED BEHAVIORS MAY BE DUE 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 may cause fear, sadness or anxiety.

## 3. ANXIETY OR AGITATION

People living with dementia can become anxious or agitated for many reasons. It can help to learn what triggers this response by considering the person's surroundings, time of day and what has just occurred, and evaluating potential sources of pain, hunger, need for sleep and sudden changes.

## HOW TO RESPOND:

### Check for pain

Pain can often trigger anxiety or agitation. Sources include being in an uncomfortable situation, injury, reaction to medication or a urinary tract infection.

### Listen to the frustration

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

### Provide reassurance

Speak in calming tones and phrases. Let the individual know you're there for support.

### Involve the person in activities

Engage the person in art, music or other activities to promote relaxation.

### Modify the environment

Decrease noise and distractions or relocate the person.

### Find outlets for energy

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



## 4. FORGETFULNESS AND CONFUSION

A person living with Alzheimer's disease 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 can be difficult for caregivers.



### HOW TO RESPOND:

#### Stay calm

Not being recognized can be painful. It may help to talk about it with a friend or family member.

#### Respond with a brief explanation

Don't overwhelm the person with complex responses. 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 responses like, “I thought it was a fork” or “I think he is your grandson Peter.”

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

Alzheimer’s causes forgetfulness, but your support and understanding will continue to be appreciated.

## **5. REPETITIVE ACTIONS**

A person living with Alzheimer’s disease may do or say something over and over again — like repeating a word, question or activity. The person may also pace or undo what has just been done. In most cases, he or she is likely looking for comfort, security and familiarity. These actions are rarely harmful, but can be stressful for the caregiver.

### **HOW TO RESPOND:**

#### **Look for a reason**

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

#### **Focus on the emotion**

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 a 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 a distraction. Engage the person in an activity like taking a walk or working on a puzzle.

## Use memory aids

Offer reminders like notes, photographs, clocks or calendars.



## 6. NEW SUSPICIONS

Memory loss and confusion may cause a person living with Alzheimer's to perceive things in new and unusual ways. Individuals may become suspicious of those around them, even accusing others of theft, infidelity or other improper behavior. Sometimes a person living with the disease may 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 be understanding. Then offer reassurance, respond to the feeling and let the person know you care.

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

Allow the individual to express his or her ideas and acknowledge what was said.

#### Offer a simple answer

Share your thoughts, but keep it simple. Lengthy explanations can be overwhelming.

#### 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.

# 7. WANDERING AND GETTING LOST

It's common for a person living with dementia to wander and become lost, and it can happen at any stage of the disease. In fact, six in 10 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.

As the disease progresses, the person living with Alzheimer's will need increased supervision. At some point, it will no longer be safe to leave him or her alone.

## HOW TO RESPOND:

### Encourage activity

Keeping the person living with Alzheimer's active and engaged can help discourage wandering behavior by reducing anxiety and restlessness. Involve the person in chores, such as doing dishes, folding laundry or preparing dinner. 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 is living with 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 within the home.

## Be prepared

Consider enrolling in a wandering response service. Contact the **Alzheimer's Association 24/7 Helpline (800.272.3900)** for more information.

## MAKE SAFETY A PRIORITY

Visit [alz.org/safety](https://alz.org/safety) for a robust offering of safety information, tips and resources.





## 8. TROUBLE WITH SLEEP

People living with dementia may experience changes in their sleep schedule or have problems sleeping. Although the exact cause is unknown, these changes result from the disease's impact on the brain.

### HOW TO RESPOND:

#### Make a comfortable environment

Maintain a comfortable temperature in the sleeping area. Use night lights and take other steps to keep the person safe, such as installing appropriate door and window locks.

#### Maintain a schedule

As much as possible, encourage a regular routine of waking up, meals and going to bed.

#### Manage naps

If the person has trouble sleeping at night, it can be helpful to limit daytime naps.

#### Exercise

Try to include some type of exercise, as appropriate for the person, during the day. Physical activity may promote restfulness at night.

#### Avoid stimulants

Reduce or avoid alcohol, caffeine and nicotine, which can all affect ability to sleep. Discourage watching television during periods of wakefulness at night, as it can be stimulating.

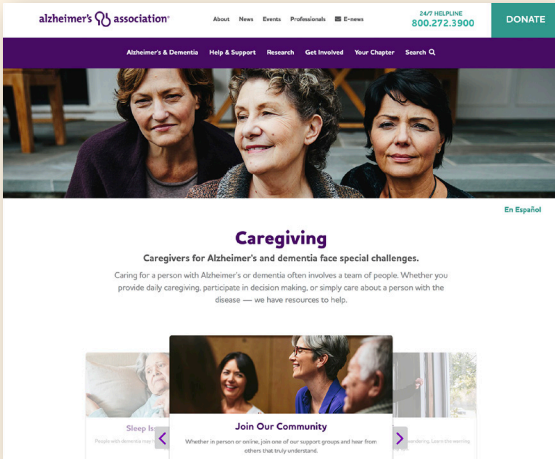
#### Talk to a doctor

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.

# HELP AND SUPPORT FOR CAREGIVERS

Visit [alz.org/care](https://www.alz.org/care) to access reliable information and resources, including:

- » Alzheimer's Navigator: Assess your needs and create customized action plans.
- » Alzheimer's Association & AARP Community Resource Finder: Find local resources.
- » ALZConnected: Connect with other caregivers who can relate to your situation.



The screenshot shows the Alzheimer's Association website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the logo, menu items (About, News, Events, Professionals, E-news), a 24/7 Helpline number (800.272.3900), and a DONATE button. Below the navigation bar is a purple header with links for Alzheimer's & Dementia, Help & Support, Research, Get Involved, Your Chapter, and Search. The main content area features a large image of three women. Below the image is the heading "Caregiving" and the sub-heading "Caregivers for Alzheimer's and dementia face special challenges." The text below reads: "Caring for a person with Alzheimer's or dementia often involves a team of people. Whether you provide daily caregiving, participate in decision making, or simply care about a person with the disease — we have resources to help." Below this text are three smaller images with captions: "Sleep Is..." (People with dementia need...), "Join Our Community" (Whether in person or online, join one of our support groups and hear from others that truly understand.), and "Memory Care..." (Memory Care is a...



**alz.org/care**

Access reliable information and resources, such as:

- » Alzheimer's Navigator® – Assess your needs and create customized action plans.
- » Community Resource Finder – Find local resources.
- » ALZConnected® – Connect with other caregivers who can relate to your situation.
- » Safety Resources – Access information and tools.



**alz.org/CRF**

We're in communities nationwide.



**800.272.3900**

24/7 Helpline – Available all day, every day.

**alzheimer's  association®**

The Alzheimer's Association is the 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 disease®.**

**800.272.3900 | alz.org®**

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