

Understanding Responsive Behaviors Related to Dementia

Very often people with dementia communicate with us by using actions, words and gestures that we may not understand right away, but are an expression of something important about their personal, social or physical environment.

These are referred to as responsive behaviors and usually occur because the person has a need that is not being met, and does not know how, or is unable to express this in words. In other words, they are responding to a lack of something, or something they do not like or do not want, such as pain, too much stimulation or feelings such as anxiety or fear.

Responsive behaviors can occur suddenly, at any stage of dementia, and can be frustrating and challenging for others. Its important to remember not to take this personally.

First, please know that you are NOT alone. We are here to guide you through this *hand in hand*.

Many behaviors are driven by the need to have purpose and to be productive in one's life. Those feelings don't end once someone receives a diagnosis of dementia. We have found that if you can help someone to be productive, they are more joyful and content, and less likely to behave in unexpected ways. The following are some tips that will help both care partners and individuals living with dementia.

Important Points for You to Know



The person is not doing this to annoy you.

Your loved one has a brain disorder that causes certain responses and actions over which he or she has no control.

Responsive behaviors are a form of communication.

Although they may seem negative to loved ones, behaviors are often just the expression or communication by the person with dementia in response to a need that is not being met. Understanding and preventing behaviors begins with asking yourself "*Why is this behavior happening?*" The more questions you ask, the closer you'll be to determining the cause.

Think about...

- What happened right before?
- Who was involved?
- Could something be causing the person pain?
- Could this be related to medications or illness?
- Is the person trying to engage in a routine from the past?



Responsive behaviors usually occur for a reason.

Simply daily events can result in changes in a person's actions. For example, something a person did or said can trigger a responsive behavior. Something in the physical environment such as a decrease in lighting because of the time of day could cause your loved one to respond in an unexpected way.

Go with the flow.

Try to accommodate the person's behavior, not control the behavior. For instance, if a person with dementia stops washing their hair, don't force or chastise. Look at the showering process and environment for a trigger. Was the bathroom recently remodeled with a new shower head? Maybe the person used to always shower in the morning and now you have changed their schedule and are asking them to shower at night. Changing our own behavior will often result in a change in our loved one's behavior.

Prevention is the key.

Often when responding to someone's behaviors, care partners react by restricting movement. This is not always the best solution for someone with dementia. For example, if your loved one tries to leave the house every morning and argues with you when you ask him or her to stay in the house, your immediate reaction might be to lock all the doors.

Instead, ask yourself, *"Why is my wife leaving the house?"* Is there something in the house that is bothering her? Would she like to work in the garden? Would she like to go for a walk? Perhaps in the past, was she in the habit of leaving for work or walking the dog right after breakfast?

Try testing some solutions. Rather than trying to restrict someone from leaving the house, try scheduling a short walk every morning right after breakfast and time in the back yard after lunch.

Engage the person in meaningful activity.

Imagine how you would feel if your husband was fidgeting with all of the kitchen appliances, clocks, alarm clocks, phones, mixers, etc., and has already broken one alarm clock and a toaster. Your first instinct might be to put away all of the appliances and clocks out of sight. However, if you stop to consider why your husband might be doing this, you may come to the conclusion that he is bored. If he has always liked fixing things, maybe that is why he is behaving like this. It could be that he wants to feel useful or helpful.

Try setting up a small table in the kitchen or family room with items from the thrift store that your husband can fix for you. It would be wise to set up this space close to where the care partner spends time if safety is a concern.

We have found the best way to prevent behaviors is to help the person engage in a meaningful activity. Most behaviors are often a response to a need to be active, safe, useful, or busy.

Be flexible.

What works today, may not work tomorrow. There are no perfect solutions. And, of course, some problems are not simple to solve. Understand the person is not trying to annoy you. An impaired brain can react in all sorts of strange or different ways that we don't expect. Try to have patience and always look for a reason for the behavior.