

## **No. 4. Tips for Managing Challenging Behaviours**

People who have a dementia diagnosis may sometimes behave in ways that are verbally aggressive, e.g. swearing, screaming, making threats, shouting, and using offensive language.

This can be very distressing for the person with dementia and for those supporting them.

### **What May Cause Challenging Behaviours?**

Structural and chemical changes in the brain that occur during the course of dementia can lead to behavioural and psychological symptoms.

Behavioural symptoms are typically not deliberate and can be an attempt at communication when the person with dementia is having difficulty expressing their needs.

The verbal aggression may be linked to the person with dementia's personality and behaviour before they developed dementia. However, people who have never been aggressive before may also develop this type of behaviour.

This type of behaviour tends to be directed towards the primary carers and may not always be apparent to other family members or friends.

It may assist the GP, if you keep a diary record of these incidents: when, how often, possible triggers, what happened, what worked with resolving the incident?

### ***Delirium:***

Delirium is confusion that comes on very fast, sometimes in just a few hours, because of an underlying physical problem. Delirium can be caused by infections (eg urine infection or respiratory infection), lack of sleep, medications, recent surgery, severe pain, medical illnesses like cancer.

Signs a person may be experiencing Delirium: disorganised thinking or behaviour, altered sleep patterns- e.g wakefulness and drowsiness, delusions or hallucinations, incoherent speech, lethargy, or restless agitation. In extreme cases the person may become aggressive, agitated or impulsive.

Delirium is a serious condition. If you think someone is experiencing Delirium, contact their GP for an urgent assessment and advice.

### **Possible reasons for the person with dementia being verbally aggressive at times:**

A person living with dementia may not be able to communicate why something is happening. You may need to do some investigating to find out what is causing the behaviour. Some things to consider include:

- Is the person: too hot, too cold, unwell, constipated, hungry, thirsty, tired, in pain?
- Are they having difficulty hearing/seeing? (Carers need to assist with cleaning glasses, check hearing aid batteries are in working order).
- These behaviours may be a side effect of a medication they are on. This is one reason why informing your GP of the behaviour changes is important.
- The person may be feeling bored, anxious, worried re their memory loss.
- They may be having difficulty processing information.
- They may be missing a sense of safety, security and familiarity.
- The person may be experiencing hallucinations and/or paranoid thoughts.
- The environment may be too noisy, hot, unfamiliar.
- We all have bad days, when we feel irritable, this is also true for people who live with dementia.

### **Some Suggestions for Managing Challenging Behaviours:**

- Challenging behaviours are often complex. There is no 'one size fits all' solution.
- Be mindful of the person with dementia's non-verbal signs of increasing anxiety/frustration or potential triggers, you may be able to de-escalate situations before behaviours escalate. Try and anticipate their needs and create a calm/unstressed environment.
- We communicate a lot with our body language, facial expression and tone of voice. Appear positive, cheerful, calm and offer reassurance. Use simple language, short sentences, and use of steady tone of voice.
- Take a few seconds to think about how you are going to respond to the verbal aggression, breathe/calm the mind and reply with kindness.
- Remove or reduce perceived threats for the person with dementia: ensure they have space, dignity, safety, etc.
- Show the person familiar objects in house (e.g. old photos/videos/TV programs) or garden/shed. Talk with them re home/family and reassure.
- Change the subject, offer a cup of tea, ask for their assistance to do a household task, walk to letter box, etc.
- Offer food/drink, encourage a daytime rest. Give them physical space.
- Try not to contradict what the person says/believes, this could increase their anxiety/frustration.
- Try to keep to the person's usual daily routine. Include time for familiar, calming, fun activities. (Music, art/crafts, pets, etc).
- Take opportunities to go for regular short walks, sit outside for meals, do some type of regular enjoyable physical exercise.
- Set up regular opportunities for social connections. Phone or have a video call with a relative/friend.
- Set up a box of 'calming activities', from items of interest to the person with dementia sourced from items you may have at home. E.g. family photos, balls of wool, buttons, playing cards etc.
- Home environment: remove clutter, have items of interest to the person with dementia clearly on display/easy to find. Consider having sensor night lights, signs/photos to help locate rooms/everyday items.
- If the person with dementia is not in immediate danger, sometimes excusing yourself politely and leaving them alone for a couple of minutes may calm the situation.
- Know when to walk away. If the person becomes angry/threatening, take a deep breath and walk away. You can always go back and try again in a few minutes.

**Afterwards:**

- Focus on the person, not the behaviour.
- Do not punish or revisit the incident (they may not recall what happened).
- Make sure you have someone to talk to for support, family, friend, GP, Counsellor, Dementia Waikato.

**Finally, Be Kind to Yourself.**

- You are human.
- You may become stressed and frustrated with the person you are caring for.
- Apologise to them, laugh at yourself, give them a hug, and move on.
- Take care of yourself, as well as your family member who has dementia.

***Feel free to contact us at Dementia Waikato if you need to talk about any issues you are having with the person you are caring for.***

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