

Combative, agitated behavior

Changes in behavior may be caused by:

- Physical discomfort
- Over-stimulation
- Unfamiliar or confusing surroundings
- Complicated tasks
- Frustrating interactions or communication problems.

“It is virtually impossible to predict the timing as well as all the possible dangerous or unsafe behaviors of someone with dementia,” says Lisa Gwyther, MSW, associate clinical professor in the department of psychiatry at Duke Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina. “Even in the most secure environments, unprovoked combative or unsafe behavior may occur without warning. If triggers for the behavior are not identified, the problem could worsen.”

Gwyther notes the most common triggers for combative behavior are fear, misunderstanding or misperceiving a threat that isn’t there, an inability to communicate needs or problems, depression, worry, and frustration.

Managing aggressive or unsafe behaviors

People with Alzheimer’s may exhibit aggressive behaviors in their search to find security in a world that no longer makes sense. There are practical ways for caregivers to help minimize challenging behaviors in a person with Alzheimer’s:

- Have familiar objects, such as items in a memory box, immediately available to reassure and distract the person.
- Ask for the person’s help but do not rush, criticize, or make demands.
- Offer a snack or treat to divert the person’s attention.
- Remove potentially dangerous or confusing items, such as sharp objects.
- Learn the person’s nonverbal signs of increasing agitation (e.g., red face, clenched fists, rapid searching with the eyes, or waving hands in the air).
- Learn verbal signs of escalating anger such as cursing, using a loud voice, and muttering.
- Change the environment or move to a quiet, smaller space.
- Reduce expectations by allowing more time to accomplish fewer activities/tasks.
- Slow down your actions as the person speeds up. Your nonverbal and verbal slowing can have a calming effect.
- Never surround or gang up on someone who is about to lose control. If the person feels cornered or overwhelmed, it can prompt a “fight or flee” response. Physical restraints are not effective in reducing aggressive behavior.
- Do not make any assumptions about what is safe.

Each time a challenging behavior occurs, consider the “when, where, who, what, and why” of the incident. Does the challenging behavior only occur at certain times of day, or in certain places or with certain people? Recognize that people with dementia are very sensitive to the emotional state of those caring for them. They pick up on a caregiver’s clenched teeth and irritability. The challenging behavior could be related to underlying physical causes or needs.

Identifying underlying physical causes

A sudden behavior change may be caused by physical discomfort, pain, constipation, infection, or an adverse reaction. If the behavior occurs frequently, consult a physician to identify potential underlying causes.

Modifying the environment

A soothing environment is essential. Potentially dangerous or confusing items, such as sharp or odd-shaped objects, should be removed from the person's view. Personalize the room with keepsakes or photos of special moments. A memory box of work items or the person's favorite hobby may prompt reminiscing.

Assisting with personal care

Behavior problems most often occur when caregivers assist people with Alzheimer's with personal care. The person may feel vulnerable or feel as if personal space has been invaded.

Delay personal care when the person is upset.

- Move to the side or out of the person's direct vision when helping with bathing or personal care. The person is less likely to feel attacked if the caregiver stays at his or her eye level and is non-confrontational.
- The person may need real physical reassurance through hugs or hearing that you are there to protect his or her safety.
- If the person grabs your arm or wrist, stroke the lower arm of the grabbing hand or place your hand over the grabbing hand and squeeze firmly.
- If threatened with an object like a cane or chair, grab a safe object like a pillow that can stop the threatening object without causing harm.

Communicating after an aggressive incident

Gwyther notes that talking in soothing, calm tones of voice, and keeping comments simple will aid in communicating with a person with Alzheimer's. "Comfort the person after the incident is diffused," she said. "More reassurance will be needed once everything is under control. Suggest taking a deep breath together."

- Use short, simple phrases or sentences as well as familiar words.
- Do not argue with the individual.
- Approach the person calmly from the front, move to the side, and speak slowly in a low-pitched voice.
- Give the person time to respond.
- Pay attention to the person's nonverbal messages as well as what they say verbally. Facial expressions and body language can sometimes provide additional information on how the person is feeling.
- Respond to the feelings behind the words or body language.
- Keep noise and distractions to a minimum.
- Always remind the person who you are and what you are attempting to do.
- Offer guided choices such as, "Would you prefer to wear the blue shirt or the red shirt?"

It is important to realize that not all behavior changes are problematic. If a certain behavior doesn't cause difficulties for the person with Alzheimer's, caregivers, or others, the best strategy may be to do nothing. If all non-pharmacological approaches have not reduced or successfully addressed the escalating aggressive behavior, refer to a physician for appropriate medications.