

Combativeness and Alzheimer's Disease

fact sheet - 8



When an Alzheimer's patient becomes combative, angry or agitated, it may be because of frustration. The individual may feel pushed into doing something that simply can't be done. Consider the following factors as possible sources.

Dressing

The person who can't get an arm through a sweater may grow increasingly upset and start to thrash around.

Bathing

The person who's frightened by running water in the bathtub may push away a caregiver who's trying to give a bath.

Eating

The person who doesn't like a certain type of food may refuse to eat it.

Keep in mind that combativeness takes many forms. Sometimes the person may simply try to push your hand away, while at other times the person may resist or strike you.

Deal with combativeness by trying to examine the underlying causes. Consider the following issues:

Physical Causes

Is the person tired because of inadequate rest or sleep? Are medications such as sedatives and tranquilizers creating side effects? Is the person unable to express the fact they are in pain?

Environmental Causes

Is the person over-stimulated by loud noises, people, or physical clutter? Is the environment unfamiliar? Does the person feel lost or abandoned by the caregiver?

Poor Communication

Are you asking too many questions or making too many statements at once? Are your instructions simple and easy to understand? Is the person picking up on your own stress and irritability? Are you making the person more frustrated by being overly negative or critical?

ACTION STEPS

Be on the lookout for frustration

Look for early signs of frustration in such activities as bathing, dressing or eating, and respond in a calm and reassuring tone.

Don't take aggression and combativeness personally

Keep in mind that the person isn't necessarily angry at you. Instead, the person may misunderstand the situation or be frustrated with their own disabilities.

Avoid teaching

Offer encouragement, but keep in mind the person's capabilities and don't expect more than the person can do. Avoid elaborate explanations or arguments.

Use distraction

Don't persist in making the person perform a particular task, especially if it has repeatedly been unsuccessful. If you see the person getting frustrated with buttoning a shirt, try to distract them with another activity such as putting on a pair of pants. After a time, you can return to the shirt. Or take the person to a quiet room, have a cup of tea, or go for a walk.

Communicate directly with the person

Avoid expressing anger or impatience in your voice or physical actions. Instead use positive, accepting expressions such as "please", "thank you" and "Don't worry, everything's going to be fine." In addition, use touch to reassure and comfort the person. For example, you might want to put your arm around the person. In addition, follow these tips:

- Speak slowly and clearly.
- Use short, simple sentences.
- Approach the patient slowly and from the front.
- Use repetition and frequent reminders.

Decrease your level of danger

Assess the level of danger - both for yourself and for the person. In other words, if the person becomes combative, ask this question: "How much trouble am I in - and what can I realistically do about it?" Often you can avoid harm by simply taking five steps back and standing away from the person for a short period of time. On the other hand, if the person is headed out of the house and onto a busy street, you need to be more aggressive.

Be conservative in using restraint or force

Unless the situation is serious, try to avoid physically holding or restraining the person. By fighting with the individual, you'll probably make the person even more frustrated and anxious.

Experiment with objects that have a soothing effect

Some caregivers believe that stuffed animals have a soothing effect on the person, while others find that pets - from cats and dogs to birds or goldfish - have a calming effect.

Learn from previous experiences

Try to avoid situations or experiences that make the person combative. For example, if the individual tires easily from visits with family members, you might want to limit the length of these visits. Try to identify early signs of agitation. For example, outbursts are sometimes preceded by restlessness, frustration, fidgeting, or blushing.

Restructure tasks and the person's environment

- Simplify tasks or plan more difficult tasks for the time of the day when the person is at their best.
- Give the person adequate time to respond to your directions or requests.
- Allow the person to make some choices, but limit the total number of choices. Having too many decisions to make about what to eat or wear might be confusing or overwhelming.
- Break down each task into small steps and allow the person to complete one step at a time.
- Keep the environment calm, quiet and clutter free.

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