

Alzheimer's Aggression



Sometimes, people with Alzheimer's disease lash out for no clear reason. They may get upset or angry easily. They may curse, hurl insults, or scream. They might even throw things or resist caregivers by pushing and hitting. This kind of aggression usually starts when people get to the later stages of the disease.

No one knows for sure why it happens. Aggression may be a symptom of Alzheimer's disease itself. It could also be a reaction when a person feels confused or frustrated.

If your loved one becomes aggressive, it's important to remember that they aren't doing it on purpose. There are also things you can do to make them feel better and keep outbursts from happening.

Understand the Triggers

Alzheimer's aggression can flare up without warning. There may not be an obvious cause. But many times, there are triggers you can spot before or during a problem. Common ones include:

- Discomfort from lack of sleep, side effects from medication, or pain that they can't describe
- The environment around them, including loud noises, too much activity, or clutter
- Confusion from being asked too many questions at once, trying to understand complex instructions, or feeling the stress of caregivers
- Being touched or feeling like their personal space was invaded, as with bathing or changing clothes
- Noticing your anger or frustration
- Being criticized or told they were wrong
- Feeling rushed
- Not being allowed to do something or go somewhere
- Having to do something they didn't want to do
- Feeling threatened
- Confusion about what was happening
- Thinking something was happening that wasn't (for example, accused you of things that aren't true, such as having an affair or stealing things)

Could their surroundings or changes in routine be the reason for the aggression? For example:

- Were they in a noisy room?
- Were they with a lot of people they don't know?
- Could alcohol, caffeine, or drug use be part of the problem?
- Was there a change in their normal routine?
- Could they be reacting to your stress or emotions, such as frustration or anger in your face or voice?
- Were their clothes uncomfortable?
- Was the room dark?

Might the way their body feels be to blame?

- Are they showing signs of depression, such as sleeping more or less than usual, eating more or less than usual, and having little interest in normal activities?
- Could they be in pain?
- Might they feel ill?
- Could they be cold, hungry, thirsty, tired, or in need of the bathroom?

Ways to Keep Your Loved One Calm

Once you have an idea of what might be behind the aggression, make a plan and see if it helps. If your first plan doesn't work, try another one. You might need to try several things, and no one plan is likely to always work.

If nothing seems to help, talk to a doctor or counselor for advice.

For aggression triggered by contact with you or other people:

Speak as softly and as calmly as you can, even if you feel frustrated, angry, or sad. If you need to and it's safe, step away for a few minutes and take some deep breaths.

- Try to comfort your loved one instead of telling them they're wrong, even if what they're saying isn't true.
- Be as patient and as understanding as possible.
- Don't point out what they're doing wrong -- that can make things worse.
- Be clear about what you'd like them to do instead of telling them what not to do. For example, say "Let's sit in this chair," instead of "Stay out of the kitchen."

For aggression that happens during things like bathing, dressing, toileting, or eating:

- Break the activity into simple steps and give one or two directions at a time.
- Go slowly and don't rush them.
- Explain what you're going to do before you do it, especially before you touch them.
- Give them simple choices.

For aggression triggered by their surroundings or routine:

- Change the routine. For example, if they get upset when you go out in public in the evening, try to do those activities in the morning instead.
- If they get upset when they aren't allowed to go places, try hanging fabric or sheets to hide doors or posting a "Do Not Enter" sign.
- Limit or avoid alcohol and caffeine.
- Turn off noises like the radio or TV when you talk with them.
- Stay away from noisy places such as loud restaurants.
- Use brighter lighting indoors, especially at night.

What To Do if You Think They Might Hurt Someone

Here are some things you can do to help keep everyone safe:

- Keep dangerous things like guns, knives, glass, and sharp or heavy objects out of the house or locked away.

- Try to distract them by going for a walk, having a snack, playing music they like, or asking them to help you with something.
- If you can't calm them, give them space.
- Don't hold the person back, unless you must to keep everyone safe. Holding them back could hurt you or them, and could make them angrier.
- If you must hold them back, get help from someone else, if possible. Ask someone nearby, like a neighbor, to be ready to help if needed.

Once your loved one is calm, check for bruises or cuts, and treat them if needed.

If this happens often, it's a good idea to ask a doctor or counselor for guidance or tips or get support from others. Your local Area Agency on Aging or Alzheimer's Association chapter for caregiver groups might be able to help.

Tips to Ease Alzheimer's Aggression

Once you understand the triggers for Alzheimer's aggression, you can take steps to prevent it. A few things to try:

1. Think ahead of time if a situation might make your loved one uncomfortable, overstimulated, or confused.
2. Don't ask too many questions at once, give instructions that are too complex, or criticize. That way, you're less likely to confuse and upset the person you are caring for.
3. Limit the amount of loud noises, activity, and clutter around them.
4. Don't argue. People with Alzheimer's disease see a different reality than you do. Rather than challenge them about it, sit and listen. Ask questions about it.
5. Focus on the past. Alzheimer's affects short-term memory, so it's often easier and less stressful for someone to recall and talk about distant memories than what they watched on TV the night before.
6. Use memory cues. As the disease gets worse, remembering when and how to do everyday tasks like brushing teeth or getting dressed gets harder. Reminder notes around the house can help prevent frustration.

Alzheimer's – Sleep Issues and Sundowning



People living with Alzheimer's and other dementia may have problems sleeping or experience increased confusion, anxiety, agitation, pacing and disorientation beginning at dusk and continuing throughout the night (referred to as sundowning). Although the exact cause is unknown, these changes result from the disease's impact on the brain.

Factors that may contribute to sleep disturbances and sundowning

- Mental and physical exhaustion from a full day trying to keep up with an unfamiliar or confusing environment.
- An upset in the "internal body clock," causing a biological mix-up between day and night.
- Reduced lighting can increase shadows and may cause the person living with the disease to misinterpret what they see and, subsequently, become more agitated.
- Nonverbal behaviors of others, especially if stress or frustration is present, may inadvertently contribute to the stress level of person living with Alzheimer's.
- Disorientation due to the inability to separate dreams from reality when sleeping.
- Less need for sleep, which is common among older adults.

Tips that may help manage sleep issues and sundowning

- Get plenty of rest so you're less likely to exhibit unintended nonverbal behavior.

Schedule activities such as doctor appointments, trips and bathing in the morning or early afternoon hours when the person living with dementia is more alert.

- As much as possible, encourage a regular routine of waking up, meals and going to bed.
- When possible and appropriate, include walks or time outside in the sunlight.
- Make notes about what happens before sundowning events and try to identify triggers.
- Reduce stimulation during the evening hours (i.e., TV, doing chores, loud music, etc.). These distractions may add to the person's confusion.
- Offer a larger meal at lunch and keep the evening meal lighter.

- Keep the home well lit in the evening. Adequate lighting may reduce the person's confusion.
- Do not physically restrain the person; it can make agitation worse.
- Try to identify activities that are soothing to the person, such as listening to calming music, looking at photographs or watching a favorite movie.
- Take a walk with the person to help reduce his or her restlessness.
- Talk to the physician about the best times of day for taking medication.
- If the person has trouble sleeping at night, it can be helpful to limit daytime naps.
- Reduce or avoid alcohol, caffeine and nicotine, which can all affect ability to sleep.
- When behavioral interventions and environmental changes do not work, discuss the situation with your doctor.

Source: Alzheimer's Association

www.alz.org