

## Understanding Agitation & Repetitive Behaviors

People with Alzheimer's disease can act in different and unpredictable ways. Often times, agitated and repetitive behaviors can test the patience of the caregiver. Whatever the behavior, it is essential to identify the cause and possible solution.

Read on for a better understanding these two behaviors and insight into different approaches for addressing them. It is important to know that there two distinct types of treatments for behavior issues: Behavioral interventions and prescription medications.

Behavioral interventions should always be tried first. In general, steps to managing challenging behaviors include:

1. Identifying the behavior
2. Understanding its cause
3. Adapting the care giving environment to remedy the situation

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### Agitation

A term used to describe a large group of behaviors associated with Alzheimer's disease who may feel anxious or agitated. They may become restless and need to move around or pace. Or the person may become upset in certain places or focuses on specific details. They may also become over-reliant on a certain caregiver for attention and direction. As the disease progresses, most people with Alzheimer's experience agitation in addition to memory loss and other thinking symptoms.

#### Agitated behaviors

In the early stages of the disease, people with Alzheimer's may experience personality changes such as irritability, anxiety, or depression. As the disease progresses, other symptoms may occur, including sleep disturbances, delusions (firmly held belief in things that are not real), hallucinations (seeing, hearing, or feeling things that are not there), pacing, constant movement or restlessness, checking and rechecking door locks or appliances, tearing tissues, or other destructive behaviors, general emotional distress, and uncharacteristic cursing or threatening language.

#### Possible causes of agitation

- ❖ A number of different medical conditions and drug interactions
- ❖ Any circumstances that worsen the person's ability to think
- ❖ Stressful situations include moving to a new residence or facility
- ❖ Changes in the environment or caregiver arrangements
- ❖ Misperceived threats, or fear and fatigue resulting from trying to make sense out of a confusing world.
- ❖ Anxiety caused by misrepresentation of sights or sounds

### Treating agitation

A person exhibiting this behavior should receive a thorough medical evaluation, especially when agitation comes on suddenly. The treatment of agitation depends on a careful diagnosis, determination of the possible causes, and the types of agitated behavior the person is experiencing. Your doctor may feel it is appropriate to utilize prescription mood altering drugs to treat the behavior. With proper treatment and behavioral intervention, significant reduction or stabilization of the symptoms can often be achieved.

### Identifying agitation triggers

Correctly identifying what has triggered agitated behavior can often help in selecting the best behavioral intervention. Often the trigger is some sort of change in the person's environment.

- Change in caregiver
- Change in living arrangements
- Travel
- Hospitalization
- Presence of houseguests
- Bathing or other personal care
- Being asked to change clothing

### Preventing agitation

General care giving strategies to prevent or reduce agitated behaviors include the following:

- Create a calm environment: remove stressors, triggers, or danger; move person to a safer or quieter place; change expectations; offer security object, rest, or privacy; limit caffeine use; provide opportunity for exercise; develop soothing rituals, and use gentle reminders.
- Avoid environmental triggers: noise, glare, insecure space, and too much background distraction, including television.
- Monitor personal comfort: check for pain, hunger, thirst, constipation, full bladder, fatigue, infections, and skin irritation; ensure a comfortable temperature; be sensitive to fears, misperceived threats, and frustration with expressing what is wanted.
- Simplify tasks and routines.
- Allow adequate rest between stimulating events.
- Use night-lights to reduce confusion and restlessness at night.

### During an episode of agitation

- *Do:* redirect the person's attention, back off and ask permission, use calm positive statements, reassure, slow down, use visual or verbal cues, add light, offer guided choices between two options, focus on pleasant events, offer simple exercise options, or limit stimulation.
- *Do not:* raise your voice, take offense, corner, crowd, restrain, rush, criticize, ignore, confront, argue, shame, demand, condescend, force, explain, teach, show alarm, or make sudden movements out of the person's view.

- Say: May I help you? Do you have time to help me? You're safe here. Everything is under control. I apologize. I'm sorry that you are upset. I know it's hard. I will stay until you feel better.

## References

Capital of Texas Chapter. Facing the Challenge-A Guide for Caregivers. Alzheimer's Association – Capital of Texas Chapter, 2006, p. 19-20, 27.

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## **Repetitive Behaviors**

### Repetitive Behaviors

Repetitive behaviors in persons with Alzheimer's disease can include repeating phrases, words, questions or actions and telling the story multiple times in the same conversation. Repetitive questioning is often thought to be a need for information. However, it is more often a need for reassurance and may indicate that your loved one is anxious, seeking security or familiarity.

### Causes of Repetitive Behaviors

- ❖ **Medical/Physiological**
  - Memory loss causes the person to not remember what they have already asked or been told.
  - Damage to the part of the brain which enables a person to change activities.
  - Side effects of medications can result in repetitive movements (i.e. tranquilizers).
- ❖ **Environmental**
  - The person may question the where about of their caregiver or deceased loved one.
  - Overwhelming stimuli, such as sudden movement and harsh noise can cause anxiety.
- ❖ **Other**
  - Inability to judge time, express their needs or possibly misunderstanding a situation.

### Treating Repetitive Behaviors

#### *Behavior Intervention*

While repetition may be a sign of uncertainty and insecurity caused by memory loss, it can also be the person's way of expressing a specific need or concern. Here are some strategies from the Alzheimer's Association and Family Caregiver Alliance to address repetitive behaviors.

1. Look for patterns in the behavior (i.e. day or night, after a specific activity)
2. Record meals, pain medications, and toileting to ensure basic needs are met.
3. Check with the doctor about possible side effects of any prescription medications.
4. Speak slowly and wait patiently for a response. Be patient.

Behavior Intervention Strategies (cont.):

5. Redirect or distract them with a different activity or subject.
6. Use memory aids like signs, calendars or a white board to display the date, daily activities and appointments.
7. Reduce confusion and stimulus and maintain a calm, comfortable environment.
8. Don't point out the repetitious behavior.

*Prescription Medications*

According to DementiaGuide, repetitive questioning indicates impairment in frontal lobe function and can be displayed in all stages of Alzheimer's disease. In the event behavior interventions fail, your doctor may look into the use of cholinesterase inhibitors. It has been seen that improvement in repetition comes with overall clinical improvement.

Naomi Feil's Validation Techniques for Communicating with Repetitive Motion Behaviors

1. Centering: It is important for the caregiver to be centered and free of their own negative emotions.
2. Using ambiguity to respond to a person who fails to make sense: If a person uses an invented word, use a vague pronoun to respond.
3. Linking the behavior to the need: These individuals use behaviors to express three basic needs: the need to be loved, the need to be useful, and the need to express feelings.
4. Using touch for reorientation: Establish an immediate intimate relationship by using the fingertips in a light, circular motion on the upper cheek or use both hands to rub the shoulders and upper back.

Resources

Alzheimer's Association. [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)

DementiaGuide. Repetitive Questioning. SymptomGuide Vol. 1. [www.dementiaguide.ca](http://www.dementiaguide.ca)

Feil, Naomi. The Validation Breakthrough. Health Professions Press, 2002. Second Edition. p.94-97.

McLeod, Beth Witrogen. Caremark Health Resources. Dealing with Repetitive Behavior. <http://healthresources.caremark.com/topic/alzrepeat>

Repetitive Behavior In Dementia Alzheimer's Outreach  
<http://zarcrom.com/users/alzheimers/odem/d10.html>

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**A Note on Caregiving and Challenging Behaviors**

It is important to remember that your stress level and attitude greatly affect your caregiving abilities. When you are caring for a person who is agitated or expressing repetitive behaviors, be sure to schedule yourself a break to help keep from losing your cool. Talking with friends or a support group can also help to leave you free to cope with the behaviors and cherish your loved one. For a current list of Alzheimer's Caregiver Support Groups in your area, visit [www.alz-austin.org](http://www.alz-austin.org) and click on Support Groups or call (800) 367-2132.