



The
**Dementia
Society**
Ottawa and Renfrew County

UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOUR CHANGES



Dementia affects people in different ways. Sometimes, a person with dementia acts out of character. This can be upsetting and difficult for caregivers. Common behaviours include:

- Getting upset, worried and/or angry more often
- Repeating questions or actions
- Appearing depressed or uninterested
- Hiding things or believing other people are hiding things
- Believing or seeing things that are not real
- Wandering away from home
- Showing unusual sexual behavior

If you have noticed behaviour changes, you may be wondering:

WHY DO THESE BEHAVIOURS HAPPEN?

Dementia affects the brain and damages brain cells. This leads to changes in behaviours. Behaviours may be most noticeable when the person is:

- Frustrated at losing independence
- Feels depressed or anxious
- Feels unwell
- Is unable to express needs or pain
- Is confused or in an unfamiliar/noisy environment

It is important to know that behaviour has meaning. It can be a form of communication.

HOW CAN I UNDERSTAND THE BEHAVIOUR BETTER?

When a behaviour is recurring, try documenting what happened using the **ABC** approach.

- **Antecedent (A):** Think back to times when the behaviour occurred. What events could have led to it? Can you identify common triggers?
 - For example: The behaviour only happens in the evening.
- **Behaviour (B):** Name the behaviour. What happens?
 - For example: The person angrily accuses others of stealing.
- **Consequence (C):** How do you react? Is it helpful or unhelpful?
 - For example: Family member becomes upset and argumentative.

NOTE: Sometimes, the consequence can act as an antecedent, meaning it makes the behaviour worse. For example, if the behaviour causes you and the person to argue, the arguing (consequence) could trigger the behaviour even more.

WHAT ACTIONS CAN I TAKE?

Removing the original trigger would be ideal but is not always possible. For example, the person might feel tired or scared when the sun goes down. Changing indoor lighting can help some people. For others, these feelings occur despite best efforts to avoid them. In these situations, we cannot change their emotions or their behaviour. Instead, we can change the consequence. Here are some approaches to try:

- **Avoid reasoning.** Logical thinking can be difficult for someone with dementia. Explaining their worries away can lead to more confusion and frustration. For example, if the person says, “someone stole my book,” pointing out that they are mistaken can sometimes break trust.
- **Instead, focus on the person’s feelings, not their words.** Try saying, “you seem frustrated. I will help you look for it.”
- **Restate the person’s feelings.** Try saying, “you seem worried about your missing book.” This communicates that you understand and believe them.
- **Re-direct.** Distract the person with calming activities or by asking for help on other tasks. For example, “oh that reminds me! I was hoping to get your help painting the bookshelf.”
- **Reminiscence.** Talk about positive past events. This can change the person’s mood. For example, “I remember the library we had growing up. We used to spend hours in there.” When choosing a topic, you will need to go further back in time if their dementia is more progressed.
- **Walk away.** It is okay to take a break when emotions are strong. Needing to recharge does not mean that you are giving up.

HOW CAN I BETTER COMMUNICATE WITH THE PERSON?

Behaviour can happen when there is communication trouble. Although we cannot change the way the person communicates, we can change the way we do. Here are strategies to help relieve frustration and anxiety for the other person:

- **Keep it simple.** Only ask or say one thing at a time.
- **Reassure them.** He or she is safe, and you are there to help.
- **Use body language.** Hand gestures and facial expressions can convey that you believe and respect them.
- **Slow it down.** Allow time for the person to respond and express themselves.
- **It is not personal.** Behaviours can be symptoms of dementia. They are not always a response to something you did.

NOTE: Every person and situation is unique. These tips are for guidance but may need trial and error. Communication is not easy. It is okay to make mistakes.

WHAT IF THESE STRATEGIES ARE NOT WORKING?

If strategies are not helping and you do not know what is causing the behaviour:

- **Contact the doctor.** There could be a physical illness that needs treatment.
- **A Dementia Care Coach** can also help you find strategies and resources that fit your unique situations: <https://dementiahelp.ca/programs-services/dementia-care-coach/>
- **The Ontario Caregiver Hotline** is available 24/7 to answer care questions: 1-833-416-2273
- If the person is violent or you fear for your safety, leave the situation. For help, contact the **crisis line at 613-722-6914** or call **911**.
- If you are in distress and need support, contact the **distress centre at 613-283-3311**.

WHERE DO I FIND MORE INFORMATION?

- Watch the **Behaviour Change Webinar**: <https://youtu.be/Ys55HhyrWZo>
- Hear more about strategies from **Teepa Snow**:
 - Challenging behaviours: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZpXeefZ2jAM&t=57s>
 - The power of saying sorry: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vasnp81x63E&t=73s>
- Sign up for **Dementia Society workshops**: <https://dementiahelp.ca/programs-services/ottawa-programs/>
 - For more information about behavioural and psychological symptoms, sign up for **Dementia Basics**.
 - For more information on support strategies and approaches, sign up for **Supporting Dementia**.
- Connect with others facing similar situations. Register for a caregiver support group: <https://mkodsorcwebsiteunago.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/November-Support-Groups-Calendar.pdf>

Ottawa: 613-523-4004 **Renfrew-County:** 1-888-411-2067 | info@dsorc.org | DementiaHelp.ca

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