

## Behaviour as Communication

As an individual's dementia progresses, different symptoms or behaviours inevitably emerge. These different behaviours can be brought about by a variety of causes; sometimes initiated by the progressive, degenerative nature of the disease or triggered by certain stimuli in the individual's environment.

If a person with dementia begins to show signs of agitation, it is important that you, as a caregiver, try and determine the root cause.

- Could there be something in the person's environment that has caused them to feel upset or uncomfortable and he or she is unable to articulate the problem?
- Could the person be frustrated that they cannot effectively communicate their thoughts, and are now feeling agitated by this limitation?
- Could the person with dementia feel scared or uneasy about their surroundings which now may appear unfamiliar to them?
- Could it be the dementia itself that has caused the person to appear agitated?
- There may be many other reasons that this behaviour occurs. As a caregiver, you need to examine all possible options in order to address the issue.

Another behaviour that may manifest itself with the progression of dementia is hoarding things.

A woman with Alzheimer's disease currently lives in a long term care facility. The nursing staff informed her daughter that the mother has been taking different objects from around the care centre and hoarding them in her room. The daughter was quite confused by her mother's actions and wanted to know why this was happening.

- It is possible that her mother could be acting out of fear. Perhaps she feels that if she does not take these things, she may not have them when she feels she needs them.
- Her mother's short term memory has been impaired by the dementia. As a result, her mother likely does not remember taking these things and, consequently, returns to take more. Another possibility is that her mother may have forgotten where she put these 'found' objects if, in fact, she recalls taking them at all.
- Taking these objects may give her mother a sense of security--the more she has the better she feels.
- Her mother's judgment has probably been altered by her condition and she may not understand the value or significance of what she is taking.
- Her mother may be responding to a memory from the past. Generally speaking, for a person with dementia, memories from the distant past are much more likely to remain intact than short term memories. Perhaps her mother lived during the depression and is now hoarding food or other items because of an ingrained instinct for survival.

All of these are possible reasons as to why her mother has been hoarding different objects. The reasons for hoarding are many, and may never be fully identified.

If you are concerned that certain valuables could go missing, try keeping them out of sight. By locking up valuables in a safe place, the person with dementia no longer has access to them. Keep in mind that the person is not taking these objects with the intention of upsetting you. His or her judgment may be very compromised, not realizing that they are taking something of value.

It may also be helpful to check the trash before taking it out, to ensure that no valuables were mistakenly put there. The person may not have intended to throw the object out.

Some common hiding places in and around the home could be under pillows, in drawers or under beds.

If you find that there is a recurrent 'hiding place,' be sure to occasionally check there for hoarded items.

It may be a good idea to purchase multiples of the items which go missing frequently. That way, they can be easily 'found' again as needed.

If you do discover hoarded objects, before reacting and taking the objects away, stop and think of possible reasons why the person may have selected and hidden them in the first place. It could be very upsetting if you remove these objects. If it is necessary, try negotiating a trade for something else, as the hoarded items could be deemed very valuable. If the person cannot remember where they put the hidden objects, offer to help find them so as to reduce his or her sense of frustration.

If he or she accuses others of stealing and hiding things, offer to look into the problem. It will help validate their concerns.

It is important to keep in mind that the person with dementia is not taking things with the intention of upsetting anyone. By understanding the impact of dementia on the brain and why certain behaviours may be displayed, you may be able to brainstorm ways of effectively managing these changes.