



Managing Distress Behaviors in Dementia

Millions of Americans have a diagnosis of dementia. Caring for someone with dementia can be a difficult and rewarding job. Distress behaviors may present themselves during the various stages of dementia. Distress behaviors are a person with dementia's internal response to their own feeling of being upset.

Most of you caring for a Veteran with dementia will experience at least one difficult behavior that leaves you feeling overwhelmed, unsure about what to do, and even surprised to see your loved one acting this way.

Universal Rules to De-Escalate Distress Behaviors

- Try not to personalize the behavior but recognize the dementia is causing the internal upset in your loved one
- For any sudden or escalation in behaviors, seek medical advice to ensure there is no underlying medical condition or pain attributing to the behavior
- Reassure and agree instead of reasoning and arguing
- The practice of "creative communication technique" can give your loved one calm and comfort
- Share a memory or reminisce versus saying "Remember"
- Remain mindful with non-judgmental attention to create a calm presence

Managing Common Distress Behaviors

- **Resistance to Bathing**
 - Experiment with changing days and times of bathing
 - Ensure the environment is comfortable and free from distractions
 - Allow them some control over actions they are still able to do
 - Make simple and direct statements such as "Your bath is ready!"
 - Consider equipment such as a shower chair and hand-held showerhead
- **Eating and Motivating to Eat**
 - Find an eating routine and try to stick to it
 - Keep the meal place setting simple and free from distractions
 - Reintroduce foods they may have liked in the distant past
 - Provide smaller meals throughout the day
 - Prepare meals together so they know it "safe"



➤ **Incontinence**

- Consult with medical providers to rule out an underlying medical condition
- Try a toileting schedule bringing them to the bathroom every few hours
- Consider incontinence products such as waterproof sheets, adult briefs and pads
- Pay attention to non-verbal cues such as pulling at their pants or pacing

➤ **Agitation**

- Create a comfortable and soothing environment, including a calm caregiver
- Use reassuring words such as “you are safe”
- Find activities that your loved one enjoys and enjoyed doing
- Be aware of the impact of changes in their environment

➤ **Wandering**

- Provide structure, a routine, and activities to keep them reassured and busy
- Ensure basic needs are met as they could be restless because they are hungry or need to go to the bathroom
- Use childproof knobs on the doors and camouflage doors to deter them from leaving
- Utilize technology resources such as GPS tracking or ID bracelet

Coping and Resources

- Try Mindfulness meditations even for just a minute or several minutes a day
- Connect with family, friends and other caregivers
- Contact your local Caregiver Support Program Coordinator to inquire about respite options and other supports
- Call the Caregiver Support Line at 1-855-260-3274 www.caregiver.va.gov
- Visit the VHA Office or Rural Health website for dementia caregiving videos at <http://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/vets/resources.asp>
- Call the Alzheimer’s Association at 1-800-272-3900 www.alz.org
- Call the Alzheimer’s Foundation at 1-866-232-8484
- Contact your local Area Agency on Aging www.eldercare.gov