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Association for Dementia and Alzheimer's of South Africa

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Dementia Behaviours

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Dementia affects people in different ways resulting in behaviour and personality changes. The person can act in ways that are very different from their “old self”. These changes can be upsetting and frustrating for both the person with dementia and for family, friends, caregivers and people around them. The behaviour is the result of changes in the brain affecting memory, judgement, orientation, mood and behaviour. Traditionally these behaviour changes were referred to as “aggressive or difficult or challenging”, but now the accepted terms to use when referring to actions, words or gestures by a person with dementia are responsive and reactive behaviours.

Responsive behaviours refer to actions, words or gestures by a person with dementia as a response to something negative, frustrating or confusing in their social and physical environment. It is the non-verbal communication of meanings, needs and concerns. Physical needs (pain, hunger, thirst); Psycho-social needs (stress, apathy, loneliness, depression, lack of purpose); Stimulus in the environment (over or under stimulation, overcrowding, inconsistent routine, provocation by others, noise, and light activity). The person with dementia has limited capacity to communicate their needs and experiences or to control their responses.

Reactive behaviours are acting out in a reactive way and are an extreme way of expressing feelings of resentment, anger, discomfort, or frustration. As communication skills decrease, physical behaviours (kicking or hitting) are the only way to express (communicate) their feelings. This may happen at any stage of dementia (more in the middle to late stages) due to damage to the brain and the progress of dementia. When early signs of agitation are noticed, change the environment to avoid or reduce the reaction.

Reactive behaviours can be divided into two sub-types:

- Reactive physical behaviour (resisting care, throwing objects, damaging property, scratching, pinching, pushing, kicking or hitting).
- Reactive verbal behaviour (yelling, screaming, abusive language or swearing).

Supportive Intervention

Should the person with dementia display reactive behaviour it is important to look beyond the behaviour. It is important to keep a record of all reactive behaviours to identify behaviour triggers and a pattern in their behaviour, to develop a behaviour profile (background, life story, culture, religion or spirituality, hobbies, interests, routines, family dynamics, sexuality or significant life events). The profile can provide greater insight into the potential causes and solutions for reactive behaviour. Be aware of changes in their understanding, perception, reasoning, communication; environmental and social interactions, medical conditions, medications, and changes to vision and hearing. Intervention guidelines to understand the behaviour are clear communication, keeping a consistent routine, creating a calm noise-free environment, understanding and validating their feelings, providing physical comfort, and engaging them in enjoyable activities. Do not argue or try to reason with the person and seek professional support.

Types of reactive behaviours that require supportive intervention are

- Aggression, agitation and irritability.
- Anxiety.
- Depression and apathy.
- Wandering (walking about or pacing).
- Misconceptions, delusions, hallucinations and paranoia.
- Sexually inappropriate behaviour or losing inhibitions.
- Changes in the sleep cycle.

Anti-psychotic medicines are often prescribed when reactive behaviours are displayed, with limited or no benefits to the person as it may not treat the cause, and carry severe risks and side effects. Medication should only be considered as a last resort.

Family or caregivers cannot change the behaviour of the person living with dementia, but they can change the way to respond to that behaviour. Remember that behaviour does not define the person, but the behaviour is the result of dementia. Patience, empathy, and understanding are crucial when caring for someone with dementia.