



*Helping  
Handbooks*

Understanding and  
Dealing with Problem  
Behaviors in Nursing  
Home Residents

Many nursing home residents experience memory loss or other mental health problems that can lead to behavior problems.



A good place to start dealing with cognitive problems, is to make sure your loved one is evaluated to see if there is anything that can be done medically to improve their thinking, mood or behavior. Sometimes, something as simple as a bladder infection can lead to cognitive decline.

Paranoia (wrongly believing others are stealing or trying to harm you): Older people with dementia (memory loss) may have a sense of the losses they have faced - loss of home, work, possessions, mental abilities, and control over finances. A resident may forget where he or she put something and assume a family member has taken it. It usually is not helpful to argue about whether anyone took the object. It may be more helpful to say you feel sorry that the object is lost, and sympathize with how difficult it is to be without the object. Avoid getting into an argument with the resident, or both you and the resident will just get upset, with little possibility of any benefit.

It is often more helpful to focus on the feelings behind the words, avoiding a discussion of whether the facts are correct.

*When Anne's mother complained that Anne's brother, LeRoy, had stolen her money, Anne said, "It is hard when it seems like you had so much, and now you don't have anything." (Notice that she didn't risk an argument by saying "LeRoy didn't take your money.")*

### **Physically or Verbally Assaultive behavior:**

You need to learn how to keep yourself as safe as possible from a resident who tends to hit. Learn to recognize when a resident is getting upset, and, when possible, take a step back.

It is fine to tell the resident his or her behavior is not acceptable, but the resident likely will quickly forget that information. If they say something mean or insulting, it's fine to walk away to calm down. The biggest



challenge often is to not take the resident's behavior personally.

### **Hurtful or annoying remarks**

The first "loss" most-often experienced by those suffering with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia is the ability to realize something they might say can hurt someone they love. They often can't stop saying whatever comes to mind. A resident may use language, such as swear words, they would never think of using before their illness. It is important to recognize that it's the illness talking, not the person you have known.

Residents' ability to express themselves verbally may be declining, and they may lash out in frustration (physically or with words).

Residents with dementia are usually unable to express appreciation for what family members do. One daughter found it helpful to look in the mirror and tell herself all the things she did for her mother, then literally reach back and pat herself on the back.

The range of behaviors common among dementia residents are an effect of the disease, and the best strategy is to simply put up with them.

Residents may often repeat questions or stories. Respond to them in ways that are the most comfortable for you: Keep answering, change the subject or just ignore the repeated questions.

The most important thing is to control your own frustration. Even significantly demented residents can sense when someone they care about is upset, and may become upset themselves, without knowing why.

**In summary:**

- Try not to take things personally.
- Get support from others (such as nursing home family council, Alzheimer's Association support groups, family, friends and clergy).
- Take care of yourself.
- Give yourself credit for the help you provide.
- See the funny side of things, whenever possible.

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