



Counselling Psychologist: Ushmita Nana

Phone Number: 071 685 4902
Website: www.unanapsychologist.com
Email: ushmitanana@gmail.com

Practice Areas: Virtual, Lenasia and Roodepoort
HPCSA: PS 0134007
BHF : 0860020664537

AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR AND DEMENTIA

As dementia progresses through the mid-to-later stages, personality and behavioural difficulties tend to become more pronounced. These changes may include aggressive or combative behaviour in one of two forms:

Verbal: screaming, lashing out, making threats, swearing, insulting others

Physical: hitting, biting, throwing things, kicking

Individuals who displayed aggressive traits prior to the dementia diagnosis may become more aggressive as the disease progresses. Those who did not previously display aggressive traits may suddenly become verbally abusive or physically aggressive.

Causes of Aggressive Behaviour

The root cause of aggressive behaviour can be broken down into three categories:

1. Aggression due to physical changes in the brain, dementia may impact on the part of the brain which controls impulse.
2. Aggression relating to physical causes such as pain, illness, hallucinations, delusions, environment, diet, etc.
3. Aggression emanating from emotional causes such as loneliness, boredom, distrust, loss of control, loss of reality, etc.

Understanding Aggressive Behaviour

Think about aggression as an iceberg. The tip of the iceberg, being the aggressive behaviour, is outwardly visible to the caregivers and others in the environment. Beneath the tip, however, is the part of the iceberg which is not immediately noticeable, this represents the physical and emotional difficulties which the individual who suffers from dementia may not be able to comprehend or articulate. Caregivers would benefit from understanding the pattern of behaviour and addressing the underlying physical and emotional triggers, e.g.:

- Check for pain or physical discomfort
- Notice if the individual is triggered by particular people or situations



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- Determine if the aggressive behaviour happens at a particular time of day or in a particular place
- Consider if the individual is tired, hungry, thirsty or uncomfortable
- Identify potential problems in the environment e.g. temperature, lighting, access to the bathroom, etc.

Additional Strategies for Minimizing Aggressive Behaviour

- ***Reduce demands on the individual***

Aggression is often the result of feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope with demands in the environment e.g. not being able to follow conversation in group settings, experiencing difficulties in completing everyday task, etc. Break down complex tasks into simple steps. Speak in simple sentences. Avoid busy and noisy environments.

- ***Maintain a consistent and unrushed routine***

Structure and routine seem to help individuals with dementia to feel calmer and more in control of their environments. Schedules can be written on a whiteboard to facilitate recall and to create a greater sense of predictability.

- ***Keep the environment consistent***

Changes to the physical environment such as moving the position of furniture or other objects can be unsettling. Familiarity and consistency are more likely to foster a sense of safety.

- ***Avoid confrontation***

Arguing and confrontation is not recommended. Instead, the individual is more likely to calm down if responded to in a reassuring and calm tone. Distracting the individual or leaving the room for a short period of time are also helpful in diffusing anger outbursts.

It is important to remember that aggressive behaviour amongst those who suffer from dementia is not a choice but rather a symptom of the disease.

Kindly contact "Dear Dementia" for further information regarding support for caregivers:

Website: www.unanapsychologist.com

Phone: +27 71 685 4901