



# Dementia Care and Responsive Behaviours (for nurses)

## Why understanding dementia care and responsive behaviours are important for LTC practice

Many LTC residents live with dementia. Because of this, they may have limitations in some of their abilities. As a nurse, it is important to understand how to support residents who may experience dementia symptoms by promoting meaningful activities, independence and well-being.

When the needs of residents living with dementia (such as toileting) go unmet, they may express their discomfort, pain, or intense needs through their behaviours. In such cases, residents may be responding to something in their internal or external environment. It is the responsibility of the nurse to try to understand these behaviours and to try to improve the situation.

The term used for behaviours expressed in response to unmet needs is *responsive behaviours*. Residents living with dementia may be unable to understand that they are cold or hungry. That is why they may express themselves by becoming protective of themselves during care. They may also say or do things that are unsafe to themselves or others.

## Defining dementia and responsive behaviours

*Dementia* is the general term for several conditions involving memory loss and other thinking abilities that can impact daily functioning. Symptoms of dementia are known as the “8 As”.

Dementia symptom	Loss of ability	Example
Anosognosia	Recognizing one’s own limits	Getting up to walk without using a necessary aide
Agnosia	Recognizing objects, people, or sensory information	Trying to use a toothbrush to write
Aphasia	Using or interpreting language	Using unrecognizable words (in any language)
Apraxia	Using movement purposefully	Not being able to use cutlery to eat
Altered perception	Interpret sensory information	Mistaking a coat on a hanger for a person
Amnesia	Remembering	Thinking they have not had breakfast even though they have

Dementia symptom	Loss of ability	Example
Apathy	Begin activity or conversation	Taking longer than usual to join in during an activity
Attention-deficit	Maintain attention	Leaving in the middle of a game

Below are some responsive behaviours residents may have in response to unmet needs.

Type of behaviour	Physical	Verbal
Aggressive	Hitting, grabbing, biting, scratching, spitting, hurting self or others	Screaming, sexual advances, cursing
Non-aggressive	Exit seeking, disrobing, inappropriate handling of items, hiding and gathering items, repetitive mannerisms, restlessness	Repetitive phrases, strange noises, complaining, constant requests for help

(Source: Cohen-Mansfield Agitation Inventory)

## How you can use knowledge of dementia care and responsive behaviours in your practice

Working together to help residents living with dementia and their families express their needs improves care.

Ways to do this in practice can include:

- Getting to know what makes the resident living with dementia unique.
- Using knowledge of the resident's unique dementia symptoms and personal history in care planning.
- Helping the resident overcome an inability to express their needs for themselves.
- Recognizing changes in resident condition that can be signs of unmet needs, pain or worsening symptoms.

One barrier to meeting resident needs for safety and well-being can be our own biases and negative attitudes towards dementia. For example, we may believe when a resident regularly calls out, we do not need to pay close attention because it happens all the time. However, it is more helpful to approach this situation with the goal of better understanding why the resident is in distress. This is especially true for observing and reporting pain. Distress due to pain is a leading cause of responsive behaviours.

There are Ontario Centres for Learning, Research and Innovation in Long-Term Care practice tools available to help you succeed in your role working with dementia care and responsive behaviours as a nurse. These include:

- The [3R tool](#) helps teams Recognize, Reflect and Respond to worsening of resident health conditions.
- The [REAP](#) tool helps teams reflect on the causes of responsive behaviours, including Relating well, Environment, Abilities and Personhood.
- The [PIECES](#) tool helps us use a person-centred approach so that we can meet the needs of residents displaying responsive behaviours.
- The [Pain Assessment in Advanced Dementia Scale \(PAINAD\)](#) is an assessment tool used by nurses to screen for pain in residents.
- The [GPA](#) and [U-First](#) approaches equip all care providers with the communication tools and skills to deliver person-centred care to residents.

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