



Dementia Care and Responsive Behaviours (for personal support workers)

Why understanding dementia care and responsive behaviours are important for long-term care practice

Many long-term care (LTC) residents live with dementia. Because of this, they may have limitations in some of their abilities. As a personal support worker (PSW), it is important to understand how to support residents who may experience symptoms of dementia 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 PSW to try to understand resident behaviours and to try to improve the situation.

The term used for behaviours expressed in response to unmet needs is *responsive behaviours*. For example, residents living with dementia may be unable to understand that they are cold or hungry. Instead, 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 | Interpreting 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 | Beginning activity or conversation | Taking longer than usual to join in during an activity |
| Attention-deficit | Maintaining 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 long-term care 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 to 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.

One practice tool used in PSW education in Ontario to support dementia care and responsive behaviours is the ABCDs of Managing Responsive Behaviours. These letters stand for:

- Activating Event
- Behaviour
- Consequences
- Decide how to best support the client and debrief others

There are also 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 PSW. These include:

- The [3R tool](#) helps teams Recognize, Reflect and Respond to worsening resident health conditions.
- The [REAP](#) tool helps teams reflect on the causes of responsive behaviours, including Relating well, Environment, Abilities and Personhood.
- 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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