

# Agitation and frustration

B4

Alzheimer National Helpline

1800 341 341



## What is agitation?

**Agitation is a mix of anxiety and restlessness.**

Anxiety is a natural reaction to threats or fears. These could be real or imagined. When you feel anxious, your heart beats faster and you may feel out of breath. When anxiety reaches a certain level, you can experience restlessness and feel unable to stay still. This mix of anxiety and restlessness is known as **agitation**.

When a person with dementia feels agitated, they cannot rest or stay still. They feel they have to move. At these times, it can be hard for a person to understand what's happening to them, and it can become difficult to deal with. When someone is agitated, they experience a high level of stress and their quality of life can decrease. They may feel they have less control and can't enjoy what they're doing. Agitation feels awful and can have a negative effect on every aspect of their life.

## Support

Supporting someone with agitation is difficult. However, you are the one who knows the person well and you know what helps to calm and reassure them. Think of what helped them to relax before they developed dementia. Perhaps it was things like:

- **Music** – What are their favourite songs, tunes or instruments?
- **Exercise** – Do they like walking, cycling or running?
- **Special places** – Do they have a calm place they can go to, like a quiet area at home or in the garden?
- **Pets** – Interacting with animals has been shown to reduce feelings of stress, agitation and aggression.

## Showing frustration

The experience of dementia can be quite frustrating for the person as they try to manage their day-to-day life. They may feel even more frustrated if they have difficulties with memory and concentration, and feel confused. This can be especially true if they keep trying and failing to do even small things.

Dementia can have a negative effect on a person's sense of achievement, their feelings of security and belonging, and their attachments to favourite places or things to do. This can lead to changes in behaviour.

Frustration can increase. It can turn into annoyance and, for some, may even turn into anger. Most of us tend to express our anger in words and are aware of the appropriate time and way to do so. People with dementia, however, may not realise that their frustration is building up or they may be unable to express it in the usual way.

Being argumentative, and having frequent disagreements, is common. A person with dementia can be verbally abusive or aggressive. They may shout, curse, swear and so on. If the level of frustration rises further, it may even lead to physical aggression. They may slam doors, hit out, punch, kick, pinch or bang walls. This is a subconscious way of expressing frustration. It is important to remember that the person has limited control over their actions.

Agitation is a mix of anxiety and restlessness.

Frequently, people on the receiving end of this verbal or physical frustration are those close to the person with dementia. Although the aggression may appear personal and done on purpose, it is not. It is done at a subconscious level, without knowing why. All this is a source of distress for both the carer and the person with dementia.

## Experiencing pain or discomfort

A person with dementia may find it difficult to describe when they are in pain. Being able to verbally explain the pain (its location, strength and type) all take a high degree of focus and concentration for the person with dementia. Pain may make them behave unusually aggressively and out of character.

Even constant, low-grade aches and pains can affect anyone's behaviour and make it hard to handle life's stresses. People with dementia can find putting up with pain, aches and discomforts even more difficult. This means that it is important to spend time checking for pain. This may involve a visit to a medical professional.

## What can you do?

There are three areas you can focus on in dealing with these changes in behaviour:

1. Learn.
2. Prevent.
3. Take immediate action.

### 1. Learn

Learning about dementia and how it affects someone's life will help you understand how frustration can build up and lead to a change in behaviour.

- Know that this uncharacteristic behaviour is not meant as a personal attack on you.
- Think about how you are reacting to this new change in behaviour.

- Do you feel angry or annoyed? Do you automatically blame the person with dementia? Do you sometimes forget that the behaviour is a result of dementia?
- Are you able to control what you say and do?

- How do you view this situation? Is it a problem for you, the person or perhaps others?
- Talk to specialist advisors. You can find out more about dementia and Alzheimer's disease at [www.alzheimer.ie](http://www.alzheimer.ie).

### 2. Prevent

Prevention is important in dealing with a change in behaviour and there are a number of things you can do to help.

- Find out if they are in pain.
  - Do you think they may have pain? Ask them.
  - Check their facial expression.
  - Check for causes such as toothache, headache, joint pain, constipation, stomach pain, ingrown toenails etc.
- Keep a flexible routine in their daily lives. Most of us need this.
- Don't rush anything. Keep the atmosphere and environment around the person calm and understandable.
- Look for triggers or factors that lead to frustration in the person with dementia.
  - Look out for things that may lead to their particular frustration.
  - Check what happened just beforehand. Does this happen every time?
- Examine the surroundings:
  - Is the place too noisy, too busy or too stimulating?
  - Are the surroundings familiar? Does the person understand what's going on?
  - Do you think what's happening reminds them of bad events or difficult times?
- How does the person view the situation? Their perspective is important. If you understand their point of view, you may be able to change how they see things.

1. Learn. 2. Prevent. 3. Take immediate action.

- Do you think they might feel threatened, frustrated or angry about something?
- What is their body language saying?
- Does their face show annoyance, anger, anxiety or confusion?
- Are they banging or hitting the furniture, doors or other things?
- Are they focused on anything in their surroundings that may be causing them concern?

- Keep the person busy throughout the day. Being human, we all like to be doing things. They could simply feel bored.
  - You know them well. What did they enjoy doing in the past?
  - Try to support them to continue doing what they used to enjoy.
  - If necessary, re-create some of their past activities.
  - Be creative and think outside the box.
  - Encourage other family members to do things with the person.

- Reminisce. Discussing past events can bring back links with familiar names, people and places. This can help the person hold on to their sense of identity and feeling of belonging.
  - Talk about favourite times and meaningful personal stories from their life.
  - Help the person to re-experience some part of their life. For example, the smell of homemade bread may bring back happy memories.

- Find things from their past that remind them of positive experiences, such as old photos, holiday souvenirs, YouTube videos etc.

- Social contact. Generally, it does people good to meet others. They get entertainment and pleasure and can feel more connected.
  - Have they been outside of their home today? For instance, have they been shopping or gone to a café?
  - Have they met up with their friends or been to their favourite places recently?

- Exercise can relieve frustration and may help the person to feel good both in mind and body.
  - Short, frequent walks or chair exercises are recommended.
  - What is their favourite sport? Can they take part or watch?

### 3. Immediate actions

At times, the person's frustration can increase until they become physically aggressive. Here are some suggestions that may help you to deal with (or prevent) behaviour that is aggressive.

- Keep yourself safe.
  - Always have an escape route and ask others to move away if necessary.
  - Check that the person with dementia is also safe. This may involve making changes to their environment.
- Notice if there is anything nearby that may be triggering the anger. Remove it or avoid it.
- Use distraction.
  - Suggest a cup of tea, singing or going for a walk.
  - Help them focus on something positive.
- Give the person some space to let out their thoughts and feelings.
  - Allow them some personal space by not standing very close. They may feel more frustrated if you block their way.
  - Don't confront them or demand that they 'stop' or 'calm down'.
- Try not to argue.
  - Facts are NOT important just now.
  - There's no need to prove you're right. If possible, show agreement even if you believe they're wrong.

For more information or for a copy of the resources, call the Freephone Helpline on 1800 341 341 or go to [www.alzheimer.ie](http://www.alzheimer.ie)



- Stay as calm as you can.
  - Try to reassure them and show concern.
  - Allow time for them to calm down.
- Reduce the demands on them. Try not to pressurise them to behave in particular ways.
- Think about whether leaving them alone might be the best thing to do at the time.
- Take a deep breath to calm yourself before you speak. It can help you to avoid saying things you regret later on.
- Try not to take the aggression personally, although it may appear to be personal. Remember it's just how some people express the frustration they're feeling.
- Tell them you can see they feel frustrated, angry or in pain.
- Ask if you can help, instead of telling them to stop.

These suggestions will not always work and sometimes you may need to try a few at the same time. It can be a question of trial and error until you find effective ways of addressing these types of behaviour. Be aware that the way that people behave can change as the dementia progresses and what causes concern now may not be an issue in the future.

## Conclusion

It is important that you do not blame yourself if what you try does not work. It is also important to remember that caregivers can experience anxiety and frustration too. As a person's mental state is always changing, there may be no perfect solution that works every time. If necessary, reach out to specialist advisors, particularly if the behaviour becomes intolerable. In this case, talk with their doctor as they may need anti-anxiety medication on a short-term basis. This can help to reduce a person's level of agitation and allow the usual reassuring activities to work.

*This information leaflet has been developed with the Dementia Services Information and Development Centre (DSiDC), [www.dementia.ie](http://www.dementia.ie) and the Martha Whiteway Day Hospital, St James's Hospital, Dublin.*

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*The Alzheimer Society of Ireland, ASI, has taken great care to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this factsheet. ASI is not liable for any inaccuracies, errors, omissions or misleading information.*

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## Remember

1. **Learn.** Understand by observing and reflecting on what you say, what you do and how you react.
2. **Prevent.** Plan ahead, to try to avoid frustration.
3. **Stay safe.** Know what you are going to do immediately, in a difficult situation.

## For further information and support

The Alzheimer National Helpline is a free and confidential service providing information about dementia, supports and services in your area, and living well day to day. It is run by the Alzheimer Society of Ireland.

**Helpline:** 1800 341 341  
(free calls from landlines and mobiles)  
Monday to Friday, 10am-5pm. Saturday, 10am-4pm

**Livechat on the website:** [www.alzheimer.ie](http://www.alzheimer.ie)  
Monday to Friday, 10am-11am and 3pm-5pm  
Saturday, 10am-1pm

**Email:** [helpline@alzheimer.ie](mailto:helpline@alzheimer.ie)  
**Website:** [www.alzheimer.ie](http://www.alzheimer.ie)

## Contact a healthcare professional

If the person continues to behave in ways that are difficult to understand, talk to your GP. A GP can make referrals to Specialist Mental Health Services for Older People.

You can also speak to your public health nurse about access to home support, day care and respite care options. You can contact the public health nurse at your local health centre or you can contact the HSE.

**Phone:** 1850 24 1850 (calls are not free)  
**Email:** [hselive@hse.ie](mailto:hselive@hse.ie)  
**Website:** [www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)