

# Effectively Responding to Dementia-Related Behaviors

Communication and dementia-related behaviors are connected. Dementia-related behaviors can be one way a person living with dementia communicates their needs. At first, it may be hard to understand what a person is trying to tell you with their behavior. However, it is important to try to understand what's causing the behavior so you can give the right support.

**Read Manuel's story below. See how his wife, Olivia, used a four-step approach to understand what Manuel was communicating with his dementia-related behavior and respond in a way that gave him the right support.**

Manuel is living with dementia and having trouble finding the right words when trying to communicate. He used to own a restaurant but is retired now. He lives with his wife, Olivia, and has one son, Peter, who lives out of state. Lately, after dinner, Manuel has been calling Peter's name while walking into each room of the house, even though Olivia continues to remind him that Peter lives in a different state. Every day, Manuel becomes more anxious and agitated as he continues to look for Peter. One evening, he tries to leave the house without his coat and shoes.

Because Manuel usually looks for Peter after dinner, Olivia starts asking Manuel to help her with the dishes each night. As they clear the table, Olivia asks Manuel simple "yes" or "no" questions about the restaurant he owned and his favorite foods. When Manuel starts looking for Peter, Olivia puts her arms around him and says, "Peter is safe and very happy, but I know how much you miss him. I miss him too." If Manuel seems like he wants to leave the house, she first asks if he needs to use the bathroom, then invites him to sit at the table and look at some pictures of Peter and the vacations they took together as a family. Olivia also arranges for them to have a video call with Peter once a week after dinner.

## How Olivia responded to Manuel's dementia-related behavior

- » **Detect and connect.** Olivia notices that Manuel asks for Peter after dinner. She is able to connect with Manuel by asking him about his restaurant and favorite foods.
- » **Address physical needs.** Olivia checks to see if Manuel needs to use the bathroom after dinner. She also asks him to sit at the table with her to look at pictures of Peter and their vacations together to prevent him from wandering.
- » **Address emotional needs.** Olivia puts her arm around Manuel and acknowledges how much he misses Peter. She shares that she misses him too. She also reassures Manuel that Peter is safe and happy.
- » **Reassess and plan for next time.** Olivia learns that Manuel is less likely to walk around the house looking for Peter if she keeps him busy helping her with the dishes. She makes plans for Manuel to have a video call with Peter once a week after dinner.

● Think about how you can apply these best practices to your own situation. Write down one dementia-related behavior the person you care for has experienced or could one day.

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● Use the four-step approach to help identify potential causes of the behavior and how you might respond:

» **Detect and connect.** What might have triggered the behavior before it occurred? What time of day does the behavior usually occur?

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» **Address physical needs.** Does the person living with dementia have a physical need that isn't being met? Do they need to use the bathroom? Are they too cold or too hot? Are they hungry or thirsty?

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» **Address emotional needs.** What emotions might the person living with dementia be expressing through the behavior? Are they afraid, lonely or bored?

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» **Reassess and plan for next time.** What approaches worked well? What did not work well? What could you do differently next time?

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## ● Four-step approach to responding to dementia-related behaviors

### STEP 1: DETECT AND CONNECT.

- » Use what you know about the person to try and understand their needs or feelings.
- » Join the person in their reality. It will help you understand what they are trying to express.
- » Move toward the person calmly, quietly and with respect as you figure out the situation.
- » Avoid correcting the person.

### STEP 2: TAKE CARE OF PHYSICAL NEEDS.

- » Check for medical issues or what may be causing physical discomfort.
- » Make changes to make the person more comfortable.
- » Contact the person's doctor about any signs of pain, medical problems or sudden changes in behavior that occur without any triggering event.

### STEP 3: HELP WITH EMOTIONAL NEEDS.

- » Focus on possible emotions rather than the facts of the situation.
- » Offer comfort and validate the person's feelings. Let the person know you are there, that you are safe together and that you are trying to make them more comfortable.

- » Redirect their energy into a more relaxing activity. Find something that gives them joy.
- » Let it go. Try the approach again another time if the person doesn't respond when you try to help them.

#### STEP 4: REVIEW AND PLAN FOR NEXT TIME.

- » Consider what worked and what didn't.
- » To help plan for next time, think about:
  - › What are the warning signs that the behavior may be coming back?
  - › What responses work well, and in what order?
  - › When will you need to respond?
  - › How can you tell if your approach worked?
  - › Who else can help?
- » Consider calling the Alzheimer's Association® 24/7 Helpline (**800.272.3900**) to get support if you're unsure how to respond to a dementia-related behavior.