



Fact Sheet: **Coping with Combative Behavior**

When an Alzheimer's patient becomes combative, angry, or agitated, it may be because of frustration. The person may feel that he/she is being pushed to do something that simply cannot be done.

Consider the following factors as possible sources of frustration:

- **Dressing** – The person who cannot get his/her arm through a sweater may grow increasingly upset and start to thrash around.
- **Bathing** – The person who is frightened by running water in the bathtub may push away a caregiver that is trying to give them a bath.
- **Eating** – The person who does not like a certain type of food may refuse to eat it.

Deal with combativeness by trying to examine the underlying causes. Consider the following issues:

- **Physical Causes** – Is the person tired because of inadequate rest or sleep? Are medications such as sedatives or tranquilizers creating side effects? Is the person able to express the fact that he is in pain?
- **Environmental Causes** – Is the person over stimulated by loud noises, people, or physical clutter? Is the environment unfamiliar? Does the person feel lost or abandoned by the caregiver?

- **Poor Communication** – Are you asking too many questions or making too many statements at once? Are your instructions simple and easy to understand? Is the person noticing your stress and irritability? Are you making the person more frustrated by being overly negative or critical?
- **Be on the lookout for frustration** – Look for early signs of frustration in activities such as bathing, dressing, or eating. Respond in a calm and reassuring tone.
- **Avoid teaching** – Offer encouragement, but keep in mind the person's capabilities and do not expect more that he can do. Avoid elaborate explanations or arguments.
- **Using distractions** – Do not persist in making the person perform a particular task, especially if he/she has repeatedly been unsuccessful. If you see the person getting frustrated with buttoning a shirt or blouse, try to distract him/her with another activity such as putting on another article of clothing. After a time, you can return to the original task. Or, take this person to a quiet room, have a cup of tea, or go for a walk.
- **Communicate directly with the person** – Avoid expressing anger

or impatience in your voice or physical actions. Instead, use positive, accepting expressions such as “please,” “thank you,” and “don’t worry, everything is going to be fine.” Use touch to reassure and comfort the person. Put your arm around him/her or give him/her a kiss. Follow these steps:

- Speak slowly and clearly
- Use short, simple sentences.
- Approach the person slowly and from the front.
- Use repetition and frequent reminders.

Recommended Readings

Fact Sheets

Alzheimer’s Disease and Caregiving

Caregivers Guide to Understanding Dementia Behaviors

Caring for Adults with Cognitive and Memory Impairments

Coping with Behavior after Head Injury

Is This Dementia, and What Does it Mean?

Resources

Southern Caregiver Resource Center

3675 Ruffin Road, Suite 230

San Diego, CA 92123

(858) 268-4432; (800) 827-1008 (in CA)

Fax: (858) 268-7816

E-mail: scrc@caregivercenter.org

Web site: www.caregivercenter.org

Southern Caregiver Resource Center offers free support services to caregivers of adults with chronic and disabling conditions in San Diego and Imperial counties. Services include information and referral, needs assessments, care planning, family consultation, case management, individual counseling, legal and financial consultation, respite care, education and training, and support groups.