

Repetitive Behaviours

Why they happen and possible ways to respond

What are repetitive behaviours?

Dementia affects a person's ability to remember events that have happened in the recent past. Repetitive behaviours can include repeating a sound, a word, a question, or an action (for example, tapping fingers). The person may also become restless and pace around the room. It is important to remember that the person with dementia likely has no insight or control over this behaviour.

Possible causes of repetitive behaviours

- **Memory Loss.** As the disease progresses, people with dementia lose the ability to remember what they have just said or done.
- **Inability to understand what is happening.** Even the simplest, everyday chores may become unfamiliar to the person, causing them to repeatedly question what is happening.
- **Inability to understand a need or emotion.** Hunger might be expressed by repeatedly asking, "What's for lunch?" Being too warm could be expressed by pulling on one's shirt. The person may be feeling fearful or confused.
- **Frustration.** Perhaps the person is trying to communicate but is not being listened to or is unable to get the message across.
- **Stress and anxiety.** This could be due to the person being unable to interpret sights and sounds. They may be unable to remember what has just happened or where a loved one has gone.
- **Boredom.** The person may be under-stimulated and is using repetitive behaviours to alleviate their restlessness.
- **Side effects of medication.** Sometimes the cause of repetitive behaviours, such as a tongue going in and out repeatedly, is a side effect of medication.

Some tips on how to cope

The first step in managing repetitive behaviour is to try to understand why the person with dementia is showing this behaviour. Understanding the reason behind the behaviour will help you to manage it. Determine if the behaviour needs to be stopped. If it's not causing any harm, it is possible for you to ignore it. However, remember to ignore the behaviour and not the person with dementia. Keep routines consistent.

- **Stay calm.** Use a calm tone of voice. Do not take the behaviour personally. The person with dementia is quite possibly unaware that they are repeating themselves. Take a break whenever possible.
- **Eliminate triggers.** If certain objects or activities tend to trigger the person's repetitive behaviour, try to avoid these situations. For example, if the sight of shoes by the front door always causes the person to start asking, "Is it time to go now?" try storing shoes in a closet.
- **Environment.** Reduce distractions which may be triggering the behaviour. Try playing soft music which can be calming for repetitive actions.
- **Write it down.** If the person repeatedly asks the same questions everyday, try posting notes around the house in answer to these questions. For example, "Dinner is at 6 p.m." and "Your slippers are in the closet". Use picture cards if the person has lost the ability to read.
- **Brainstorm.** Try to think of different memory aids that may help orient the person. Clocks, calendars, and schedules might work. If the caregiver will be away, you could try to record an audio or videotape of the caregiver speaking and giving instructions. Find what works for you.

- **Seek medical advice.** Have a physician determine whether the person’s repetitive behaviour may be caused by medication side effects, illness, or other complications.

Some tips on how to respond:

- **Address the feeling, not the question.** Repetitive questioning is often not a need for information but rather a need for reassurance. A hug or gentle touch on the arm or shoulder may help calm the person.
- **Move on.** Allow the person sufficient time and then gently encourage them to move on with a soft touch on the arm or by pointing to the next step.
- **Redirect.** Try suggesting a favorite activity, such as a walk or listening to music, to divert the person’s attention away from the repetitive behaviour plans only shortly before the event. Sometimes simply ignoring the behaviour works in time.
- **Keep it simple.** Respond as briefly and simply as possible. Avoid telling the person that they have repeated themselves as this may only serve to upset them. If changes in routine tend to upset the person, try telling them about your plans only shortly before the event. Sometimes simply ignoring the behaviour works in time.
- **Replace.** If the person is engaging in repetitive movements, try giving them something to occupy their hands and attention, such as a simple puzzle or a stress ball.

A word about Sundowning

You may notice an increase of repetitive behaviours or restlessness in the late afternoon or early evening. This is called “sundowning” and it can occur in people with dementia. Tiredness, low lighting, increased shadows, and disruption of the body’s “internal clock” are thought to be some of the reasons for its occurrence.

Some strategies for managing sundowning are:

- Before the sun goes down, close the curtains and turn on interior lights.
- Create a calm, quiet atmosphere without a lot of distraction and busyness.
- Suggest a short nap or rest during the earlier part of the afternoon to ward off late afternoon tiredness.
- Schedule most activities for the morning.

Further information on this topic

Visit the following website:

- www.alzheimer.ca/en/on/About-dementia/Understanding-behaviour/Sundowning

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