Behavior Management for Dementia Care

Conflict and disagreement exist in all relationships. For the elderly living in long term care facilities there is no exception.

When you have a community of people with a progressive cognitive disorder such as dementia living together, it is to be expected that unpredictable and difficult to control behaviors will arise.

Most nursing homes and other long term care facilities will face behavior management problems at one time or another.

Related: How to Respond to Challenging Behavior

Behavior Management for Activity Coordinators

Behavior Management is a process that guides people to change their actions within a specific time frame. This article offers suggestions for Leisure Coordinators and Activity Staff on how to cope with behaviors in the recreation area where many residents spend a good part of the day.

Disruptive Behavior

Disruptive behavior refers to inappropriate, vocal, and sometimes hostile behaviors. Whether it is intentional or not, it is a concern that impacts on everyone's quality of life. It can distress relatives, carers, friends, other residents and contribute to staff burnout.

Related: Sundowning: Symptoms, Triggers & Strategies

Common Factors Influencing Behavior in Dementia Care

- Functional losses, handicap
- Physical health (pain, discomfort and/or infection)
- Cognitive deficit deterioration

Communication Strategies for Dementia Care

Possible Reasons for Problem Behaviors

Sometimes the cause of problem behavior is not related to any of the above. Instead, poor day-to-day interactions between clients and peers/staff/family/friends may prompt the undesirable behavior through misunderstanding, miscommunication, and unnoticed upsets such as:
- Ineffective use of discipline (harsh reaction to crisis, staff inconsistencies)
- Ignoring or rewarding poor behavior
- Perceived escalation of triggers (from the point of view of clients and others)
- Overlooked body language
- Guilt inducing message from family and/or peers
- Antagonism between client and others
- Environmental factors
- Conflicting instructions (too many, too quick, too vague)

Related: [How to Respond to Challenging Behavior](#)

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**Assessment of Behavior**

A considered assessment may give you an understanding of the meaning of the behavior. Find out what may have happened a few hours ago or the previous day to identify early symptoms or triggers so that you can alter their course in the future.

Identify the behavior patterns in terms of frequency: every half hour, all day long, only when family visits, and how long the behavior lasts. Be objective in the description of a client's actions, and avoid vague terms, such as 'annoying' or 'strange behavior'.
Managing Disruptive Behavior

There is no 'one size fits all' solution. Non-pharmacological interventions are the preferred approach. Use strategies that increase positive behavior and reduce negative behavior.

Related: Person-Centred Care

How to Increase Positive Behavior

- Draw on remaining skills / capabilities regardless of level of cognitive status
  Related: 15 Activities for Late-Stage Alzheimer's Disease
- Use social reinforcement (smiles, a caring attitude, acceptance, praise)
- Evaluate and modify Care Plan on a regular basis
  Related: How to Evaluate Care Plans & Write Quarterly Reviews
- Listen attentively
- Offer 1:1 social interaction
  Related: Tips for One-on-One Visits with Seniors
- Distract: music of choice, outings, pets, games
  Related: Games for People Living with Dementia
- Reward clients with social attention or food/drink (cup of tea) whenever you see them demonstrating kindness, patience, or when smiling.

How to Reduce Disrupting Behaviors

- Seek staff support and cooperation
- Engage family cooperation (more visits, videos from family and grand-children)
- Snoezelen or sensory room time
  Related: Snoezelen Rooms & Sensory Environments
- Massage therapy
  Related: Hand Massage & Nail Care
- Aromatherapy
  Related: Aromatherapy for the Elderly
- Always remember (and remind others) that it is the behavior that is challenging and not the person

Related: Goal-Directed Behavior

Positive Reinforcement Intervention

Tuning into desirable behaviors is an intervention that can increase positive behaviors and decrease negative behaviors.

1. Observe client closely and when the opportunity arises, comment on positive behavior:
Describe the approved behavior – “Oh my, Betty, I really like the way you are cutting these pictures” - “This is wonderful Joe, please show me how you do it!”

- Be enthusiastic and sincere
- Smile and maintain eye contact with client at all times

2. During activities and conversations and whilst doing chores or playing games, reward the client with social approval and attention e.g. asking questions related to the activity, and complimenting them on performance as above.

3. Take an interest in what clients are doing. Clients usually appreciate your attention and this can be a powerful motivator.

4. Initially, attend to clients immediately and often when reinforcing positive behavior.

5. Remember that non-verbal behavior can convey a great deal of meaning to clients. e.g. sitting by client or standing nearby, touching, joining in activity, smiling.

Planned Ignoring Intervention

Planned Ignoring is an intervention where attention is withdrawn until the behavior has improved. Staff should seek the authorization of Management or Senior Staff before implementing this intervention. It is combined with positive reinforcement for the desired response.

Planned Ignoring is used for repetitive questioning and other problem behaviors. 'Resident Behavior Charts' are used in conjunction with the 'Planned Ignoring' Intervention to monitor behavior over a period of weeks.

A Unified Approach is Important

It is important that the relevant 'Resident Behavior Chart' (sample provided) is regularly updated so that a unified approach is possible among relevant staff.

Staff on all shifts should be made aware of problem behaviors so that they can work in unison. If choosing a 'Planned Ignoring' intervention; download the instructions provided and make available to staff from all shifts.

Be patient, sometimes the client has been behaving in this way for many months, or years, and it will take a few weeks or months for change to be noticed. Of course sometimes nothing works and you may have to ask assistance from clinical staff/management/doctor or attending psychologist.

Related: [Difficult Behavior Care Plan](#)

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We'd love to hear your feedback!
How do you approach Behavior Management at your facility?
Planned Ignoring Intervention

‘Planned ignoring’ is an intervention strategy whereby you stop paying attention to someone exhibiting problematic behaviors. Planned Ignoring is used along with praising and paying attention to shape or change inappropriate behavior.

Tips for implementing a Planned Ignoring Intervention:

1. When staff notice the undesirable behavior, it is ignored. It is important to continue ignoring the behavior all day, unless it poses a danger to the person in question or others.

2. Withdraw all attention. Avoid eye contact, walk away if necessary or turn away.

3. Ignoring the behavior means disengaging: act as if the person is not there. Remain calm and collected (no abruptness or unfriendliness).

4. Continue in a detached manner even if the behavior gets worse.

5. Hold firm, don’t give in to demands (or the situation may worsen).

6. Attend to client immediately when the problem eases.

7. If problem restarts, remove all attention again.

8. As soon as client is engaged or distracted by an activity, compliment and praise cheerfully.
# Resident Behavior Chart

**Instructions:** Please tick or tally each time you have applied one of the techniques listed.

| Resident Name: ____________________________ | Start Date: ________________ | End Date: ________________ |

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**Planned Ignoring**

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**Positive Reinforcement**

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Signed: ______________________________