

Reasonable Anger and Dementia in People with Learning Disabilities

When people with learning disabilities develop dementia their understanding of the world that they are living in begins to decline. The effect of this problem is to make the person less able to cope with situations that they used to be able to deal with.

Anger is not a symptom of dementia, but a reaction to things that happen in their physical or social environment that makes the person more confused or agitated.

Early stages of dementia

People with learning disabilities and dementia can become angry about what is happening to them during the early stages of dementia. Many of the symptoms at the beginning of dementia will be happening to the person before we realise that the person is changing. The person with learning disabilities may not understand what is happening to them, but know that things are not right. This can lead to frustration and anger.

In the early stages of dementia, people lose the ability to transfer information from their short term memory to their long term memory. This will affect their ability to remember things that they have just been told, or things that they are doing, for example they may forget:

- where they are going
- what they have been told
- where they have put an object
- that they have asked a question before

It is very easy for people to be labelled as being angry and having challenging behaviour because of the ways in which we and the environment stress the person.

In the early stages of dementia, we need to think carefully about how we react to the person to prevent them becoming agitated and angry. It is very easy for us to react negatively to the person if they seem to be doing things that are out of character.

For example, we might say to the person who is asking the same question over and over: "you've already asked that question four times," but to the person this is the first time they have asked it - and their reaction may be to respond angrily.



It is vital we understand the consequences of the changes at each stage of dementia and change how we react to the person to help keep them calm and stress free. Having a consistent approach is also vital, so that everyone reacts in the same way. It can be helpful to ensure that additional cues and prompts are used to help the person understand what is required of them and to prevent them becoming angry.

For example, if you need to accompany the person on a visit to the doctor's, having a picture card of the doctor's may help to remind them where they are going in a non-confrontational way and prevent the person getting agitated and confused and therefore angry.

Mid stages of dementia

During the mid stages of dementia, the person will find it increasingly difficult to make sense of the world as we know it. As dementia progresses, the person's long term memory 'rolls back' in time. This means the person is not oriented to what is happening now but living in a previous part of their life. Contradicting what they believe to be true may result in the person becoming agitated and showing anger.

For example, the person may want a particular member of staff that they used to know and react angrily if you say they don't work there anymore.

Challenging the person's reality may make them very angry. It is important not to challenge the person, but to enter their world and reassure them.

At this stage of dementia, they often do not recognise themselves in the mirror - the image that they see cannot be them as they can't be that old in their roll back memory. They may think they are seeing a stranger and react angrily. Of course, the more they become angry, then so does the image in the mirror. The solution is to cover the mirrors at times when you know that this distresses the person.

It is vital we think about what the person with dementia is experiencing and try to 'put ourselves in their shoes' and work out what in their physical or social environment is causing them to feel angry - and then aim to resolve this.