

Understanding Behaviors as Forms of Communication

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Individuals with Alzheimer's disease experience changes in their ability to communicate. Here are some tips to help you learn how to recognize behaviors as a form of communication.

Basic Needs:

- Is the individual hungry or thirsty?
- Do they need to use the bathroom?
- Is it too hot or too cold?
- Are they bored? Can I engage them in a pleasurable activity?

Pain:

- Is the individual grimacing?
- Is the individual favoring one leg or one side of the body?
- Is the individual clutching a body part?
- Do they become upset or angry when touched on a particular body part?

Excess Stimuli:

- Are there loud noises that might be alarming my loved one?
- Are there bright or flashing lights?
- Is there too much clutter in the room?
- If children are visiting, is their play unsettling?

If the person's behavior poses an immediate threat to themselves or others, call for emergency assistance immediately.

Three-Step Approach to Improving Communication:

- **Validate:** In validating the individual's feelings, show them that you understand and respect where they are coming from, which will, in turn, help reduce any anxiety and resistance
- **Reassure:** Individuals living with dementia experience multiple losses – loss of memory, loss of thinking abilities, loss of independence. These losses often lead to pervasive feelings of fear and anxiety that accompany even the most routine daily activities. The impact of these feelings of fear and anxiety is compounded by the fact that dementia interferes with an individual's ability to communicate verbally. By attending to and responding to these underlying feelings of fear and anxiety, you may be able to diffuse distressing feelings.
- **Redirect:** Once you have validated these feelings and reassured the individual, try

redirecting their attention to something positive.