



Understanding aggression

Many people living with dementia experience changes in behaviour. Understanding the causes of these changes can help you respond.

What is aggression?

Aggression may present as physical or verbal abuse directed towards a person, people or objects.

Describing someone as aggressive may mask underlying causes. There may be a range of causes as to why they are expressing aggressive behaviour.

What are the signs of aggression?

If aggressive behaviour occurs for a person with dementia, you may see one or multiple signs below:

Physical

- Pushing out at others forcefully
- Scratching, hitting, kicking, slapping, kicking, biting or pinching others when they attempt to provide care or come into the person's personal space/room
- Damaging property
- Throwing objects/belongings

Verbal

- Yelling, shouting at others
- Making threats

'Aggression can be relatively mild ranging from being a bit upset, a bit grumpy, shouting back or pushing someone away. It can become quite significant where someone is clearly very angry and becomes uncontrollable in their pushing away, hitting, screaming or yelling.'

Why do people living with dementia experience aggression?

These may include:

- Delirium (confusion)
- Pain and infection
- Communication/care approach
- Environmental factors (over or under-stimulation)
- Sleep disturbances
- Disinhibition

What can I do to help?

- Consider what happened before you noticed the aggression to understand if there have been recent changes for the person or other potential reasons (e.g. pain, confusion) that might contribute to this change.
- Understand how often the behaviour occurs and try to describe events in detail as this can provide a comprehensive picture for identifying any patterns and potential causes.
- Give the person space to vent or express themselves safely and self-soothe.
- Ensure safety in situations of high risk – for example, leave and re-approach the person when they have calmed down and are willing to engage. Alternatively try to encourage the person into a safe environment with low stimulation and as few people around as possible or engage the person in an activity or topic you know the person likes.
- Remember undiagnosed or under-treated pain can also lead to behaviours that may present as aggressive. If pain is considered, explore non-pharmacological treatments and inform a GP.

This information has been compiled with the assistance of Professor Sue Kurrle, Geriatrician.

Disclaimer: This information is a guide only and is not a replacement for medical care by a qualified professional.



Is the change sudden and severe?

Is it a life threatening or emergency situation?

CALL 000

**We're here to help
24-hours a day,
365 days a year.**



1800 699 799



**Learn more
[dementia.com.au/
understanding-
behaviour-changes](https://dementia.com.au/understanding-behaviour-changes)**



A service led by HammondCare