



Understanding apathy

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

What is apathy?

Apathy is when someone lacks motivation to do things or just doesn't care much about what's going on around them. Apathy is very common in people living with dementia. It's really important to distinguish apathy from depression. In apathy, a person is simply not motivated.

What are the signs of apathy?

- Show a disinterest in activities but may join when prompted
- Withdraw from social situations
- Does not tend to start a conversation
- They may look tired or be sleepy
- Lose the drive to eat or have difficulty eating

Apathy can be very distressing for carers when the person they're caring for doesn't want to do anything or doesn't want to get involved, particularly in activities they've enjoyed before.

'Watching the person you care for lose interest in the world around them can be disheartening. They may no longer take a role in the household and sit quietly. They might not start conversations and show little interest in friends or family members.'

Why do people living with dementia experience apathy?

Apathy can occur due to changes in the brain as a result of dementia.

Apathy is often associated with Alzheimer's disease and frontotemporal dementia due to the region of the brain impacted.

However, at a sufficiently advanced stage of illness, it can occur in all types of dementia.

As dementia progresses, apathy is likely to be present.



What can I do to help?

- Try to maintain a daily routine and keep this visible using a calendar or chalkboard.
- Share interests and hobbies you know the person enjoyed before to help get them started with activities.
- Start doing activities with the person until they continue by themselves – show rather than tell.
- Try positive phrases like “it’s time to go on our morning walk,” rather than asking the person if they would like to go.
- Try different strategies to see what works best for them. Some may work better than others.

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?

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