



MARYLAND COALITION ON MENTAL HEALTH & AGING

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HELP WITH CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS: A Fact Sheet to Share

Life long behavior patterns, attitudes, belief systems etc. don't change just because a person gets older. Uncharacteristic negative behaviors are usually a symptom of a problem. The behavior and mood changes that accompany mental illness or dementia can be particularly frustrating and challenging for those close to the individual who has the illness.

Behavioral concerns and mood changes are not only problematic to caregivers and loved ones. The person experiencing the change is also suffering. Examples of behaviors that accompany mental illness and dementia include: anger, sleep problems, memory loss, impaired concentration, indifference, worry, paranoia, negativity, aggression and more.

There are many ways to address challenging behaviors. First, however, you must ***make sure that the behavior is not being caused by a medication*** or a physical condition such as an infection. If this might be the case, it is very important to get medical attention quickly.

Most behaviors carry messages about what an individual needs or how s/he is feeling. Try to step outside of the situation to determine what the behavior may reflect. Pay attention to the people, events or times that may trigger problems. Likewise, notice those people or situations that have a calming effect on the individual. Many people suffering from depression or anxiety will have consistent behavior, reflecting their illness, which does not improve unless they get treatment. For example, a person with major depression may express anger and impatience for most of the day. S/he may never want to visit with others or leave her/his room. The good news is that **treatment for mental illness works** and people can experience relief from such unwanted symptoms.

Here are some suggestions for coping with challenging moods and behaviors:

- Practice patience, flexibility and understanding that the illness, not the individual, is the reason for the challenge. Don't take attacks personally.
- Don't try to talk the person out of their mood. Instead, tell them that you understand how they are feeling. You don't have to agree with the person's perspective but you need to respect that the person's experience is real to him/her. This is called validation.
- Use sincere and non-judgmental words that are supportive and reassuring.
- Avoid arguments. If there is conflict, try to take some time away and re-approach the issue at a different time if possible. Give yourself and the other person space and time.
- Body language is very important. Use a calm and unhurried approach, maintain eye contact, have an open and friendly posture.
- Use a calm and low voice, keep directions / statements simple, provide reassurance, offer choices, let the person fully express him/herself.
- Move to an area familiar and safe for the individual, eliminate potential distractions.
- Obtain personal and professional support to better manage the behaviors and cope with difficult feelings.

Further information on mental health can be found on the website www.mdaging.org or contact Kim Burton at 410-235-1178 x 210.