



Understanding distress during personal care

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

What is distress during personal care?

Distress during personal care is a negative response when carers are assisting during activities such as dressing, showering or toileting. The distress may also reflect past trauma, pain (or the anticipation of it) or cultural norms.

While personal care is important for health and comfort, the intimate activity of being washed or taken to the toilet can make the person feel very uncomfortable.



What are the signs of distress during personal care?

If someone is receiving personal care and they are unable to communicate the way they feel, this can cause distress.

As a result they may:

- Become very upset
- Actively push away or scratch
- Shout or scream
- Freeze or turn away, curl up in a ball or cry
- Have difficulty communicating the need to use the toilet

Why do people living with dementia experience distress during personal care?

There are a number of contributing factors. It may be the person:

- Has had some abuse or trauma in the past.
- Has no understanding of what is about to happen.
- May be scared by the running water or scared by going into the toilet.
- Has a fear related to the gender of the carer, for example, if it's an older lady, she may feel uncomfortable about being washed by a young male nurse.

We have to look very carefully at all the different possible causes.

What can I do to help?

- Consider their personal preferences: do they prefer a warm bath before bed, or have they always taken a morning shower?
- Ask or look for signs of pain and discomfort, e.g. wincing, grimacing, clenching teeth, groaning or frowning. Address any pain before helping with personal care.
- Consider the bathroom environment: is it warm enough and well lit?
- Encourage the person to do as much as they can for themselves, such as undressing or using a face cloth.
- Use music to reduce anxiety for everyone. Try playing the person's favourite music as they get ready for a shower or bath.
- If the person becomes agitated, take a step back and stand quietly until they are ready for you to help again.
- Be realistic and flexible: showering a couple of times a week is perfectly acceptable. Take the wins, making a note of what worked and what did not.
- Consider the gender of the carer.

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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