

A Care Partner's Guide to Behavioral Symptoms in Alzheimer's

Ways to recognize symptoms, respond in the moment, and care for yourself

A Note for Care Partners: Understanding Behavioral Symptoms in Alzheimer's

Navigating behavioral symptoms in Alzheimer's care can be emotionally complex, and recognizing your own experience is an important part of the journey.

Alzheimer's changes how a person thinks, feels, and experiences the world. Behavioral symptoms—such as apathy and withdrawal, sundowning, wandering, and changes in sleep—can appear even in the early stages of the disease and often become more frequent or intense over time¹. Some individuals may even experience additional symptoms, like loss of appetite or depression.

These behaviors are caused by changes in the brain. They are not intentional, and they are not a reflection of your care. Understanding what you're seeing—and learning ways to respond—can make these moments feel more manageable.

This guide was created for care partners. It offers:

- **Ways to recognize** behavioral symptoms and what they may look like
- **Ways to respond in the moment** that may help bring more calm and comfort
- **Ways to care for yourself** so you feel supported too
- **Ways to reach out for help**, including what to discuss with your patient's healthcare provider

Support is available, and even small changes in approach or environment can make meaningful differences for both you and the person in your care.

Caring for Yourself

Caring for someone with Alzheimer's is physically and emotionally demanding. Your health and well-being are essential — caring for yourself helps you better care for your loved one.

Simple ways to care for yourself:

- Take short breaks, even five minutes
- Accept help when it's offered
- Join an online or local support group
- Use respite care* when you need time to reset

Quick reset ideas:

- Step outside for fresh air
- Listen to calming music
- Call or text a friend
- Stretch or take a few deep breaths

***Respite care** is short-term support that gives caregivers time to rest. It may involve a home health aide, adult day program, trained volunteer, or another temporary care option.²



Voices of Alzheimer's has collected important information on a variety of topics for Care Partners voa-foundation.org/resources1

Recognize & Respond: Common Behavioral Symptoms in Alzheimer's

Behavioral symptoms of Alzheimer's can occur at any stage. Below, we have described what some common symptoms look like, suggestions for responding in the moment, and advice for you as a care partner.

APATHY & WITHDRAWAL

- **What it is:**
 - A loss of motivation, interest, or engagement in social interactions and daily activities
- **What you may see:**
 - Your loved one may stop initiating conversations, avoid social contact, or lose interest in hobbies they once enjoyed
- **What may help:**
 - Offer gentle encouragement without pressure
 - Suggest quick, simple, low-effort activities (music, photo albums, coloring)
 - Celebrate small moments of engagement³

SUNDOWNING

- **What it is:**
 - Increased confusion, restlessness, or agitation that begins late in the day or evening⁴
- **What you may see:**
 - Your loved one may pace, become more irritable, or seem anxious as the day goes on⁵
- **What may help:**
 - Keep rooms brightly lit as daylight fades
 - Use a calming, predictable evening routine
 - Reduce background noise and overstimulation⁶

WANDERING

- **What it is:**
 - Walking without a clear purpose, sometimes leaving safe areas
- **What you may see:**
 - Pacing hallways, checking doors, or unexpectedly going outside
- **What may help:**
 - Create safe, supervised walking paths
 - Use door alarms or motion sensors if needed
 - Offer regular, guided walks or meaningful movement breaks⁷

SLEEP CHANGES

- **What it is:**
 - Sleeping at unusual times — awake at night, sleepy during the day
- **What you may see:**
 - Restlessness overnight, dozing in the daytime, or an irregular sleep-wake rhythm
- **What may help:**
 - Keep a consistent sleep and wake schedule
 - Reduce caffeine later in the day
 - Encourage morning light exposure to support natural rhythms^{8,9}

If you're unsure whether a behavior is new, changing, or related to another health issue, reach out to your patient's healthcare provider. They can help you understand what's normal and what may need attention.

Agitation in Alzheimer's

Agitation is common in Alzheimer's and can be distressing for care partners and patients. It often comes from fear, confusion, pain, or unmet needs—not from anger toward you.

What it is

Agitation is restlessness or distress, often caused by fear, discomfort, or unmet needs. It may lead to yelling, refusal, or aggression.¹⁰

What you may see

- Pacing or restlessness¹¹
- Raising their voice or refusing meals/care
- Yelling, pushing, or hitting¹²

What may help

- Speak slowly and calmly
- Offer simple choices (“Tea or water?”)
- Redirect to familiar, comforting activities
- Check for physical needs (hunger, pain, bathroom, temperature)
- Reduce noise and soften lighting
- Ensure glasses and hearing aids are on¹³



*If you ever feel unsafe, step back, take a breath, and return when you feel ready. Agitation is not anger toward you — it often comes from fear or confusion.**

Psychosis in Alzheimer's

Psychosis can happen at any stage of Alzheimer's and often becomes more frequent later. Seeing or hearing things that are not there—or believing things that aren't true—can feel scary, but these experiences are caused by changes in the brain.

What it is

Psychosis means the brain processes reality differently. A person may experience hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that aren't there) or delusions (believing something that is untrue).¹⁴

What you may see

- Insisting there's a stranger in the room when no one is there
- Believing someone is stealing from them
- Talking to voices or people you cannot see¹⁵

What may help

- Don't argue or try to correct
- Acknowledge feelings: “I can understand that is frustrating. Let me help you.”
- Redirect to calming activities like music, photos, or a comfort object (blanket, doll, pet)¹⁶



*These experiences can feel unsettling or frightening for you, too. Remember — this is the disease, not the person you are caring for. Your calm presence helps ground them.**



TALKING TO THE DOCTOR



Bring specific notes to appointments:

- When symptoms began
- How often they happen
- What seems to trigger them
- What you tried and how they responded
- Whether your or their safety is at risk
- If symptoms are worsening in their frequency or severity

Ask your patient's healthcare provider about:

- Ways to reduce distress or agitation
- Whether symptoms could be related to another condition
- When medications or additional support may help
- Local caregiver resources or respite options

This helps doctors adjust care strategies and ensures you and the person in your care get the right support.

Building Your Support Network

You don't have to do this alone. Creating a circle of support can make care more sustainable and less isolating.

Ways to build a support network:

- Ask relatives, neighbors, friends, or faith communities to help with small tasks
- Connect with local or online caregiver support groups
- Explore respite services to give yourself planned breaks
- Reach out to local Alzheimer's organizations for guidance and community programs



*Asking for help is not weakness—it's a vital part of caregiving.**

Key Takeaways

- Alzheimer's **affects behavior**, not just memory
- **Caring for yourself** helps you care for your loved one
- Symptoms can **appear at any stage**, and each person's experience is unique
- **Consistency, patience, and compassion** matter more than perfection

Where to Find More Information

Scan the QR code for:

- More information on behavioral symptoms
- Support groups and local services
- Updates on Alzheimer's research and care



This resource was made possible through educational collaboration with the Alzheimer's community and supporting partners.

Selected general advice in this guide reflects shared lived experiences informed by Voices of Alzheimer's discussions with patients and caregivers.

**This content is informed by Voices of Alzheimer's discussions with patients and caregivers and reflects shared lived experiences.*

Notes and Observation Tracker

Use this space to write down changes you observe and questions for your patient's healthcare provider.

DATE	What Happened	Possible Triggers	Questions for Doctor

Notes:

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