

Special Problems: Inappropriate Sexual Behavior

This pamphlet is part of a series on dementia-related diseases. This series was prepared by Kenneth Hepburn, Ph.D., Geriatric Research, Education and Clinical Center (GRECC) of the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Sometimes people with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias may begin to act in "socially inappropriate" ways. They may undress or masturbate in public. They may urinate or defecate in odd places. They may make frequent, unreasonable or tasteless sexual demands. They may use off-color language or make lewd remarks. They may even display sexually aggressive or violent behavior.

These kinds of actions by impaired patients are not well understood. One idea is that they may be one more form of "regression" caused by the disease. ("regression" means that normal adult behavior is replaced by more infant-like behavior.)

Manners are learned. People learn to eat with knives and forks and not with their hands. So, too, people learn that sexual feelings and behaviors are dealt with in certain careful ways. Perhaps the disease causes the impaired person to forget his or her sexual manners.

Sometimes, such behavior has no sexual basis at all. A person who removes clothes, for instance, may need to go to the bathroom or may feel too hot. The person who urinates in the wrong place may not be able to find the bathroom. In these cases, the actions the person took were socially inappropriate. But in each case, the problem the person was trying to solve was not really sexual.

Such strange behavior is **not** a frequent symptom of these disorders. In most cases, such problems emerge during one phase and fade in the next phase of the disease. But phases can last for a long time, sometimes for years.

Such behavior poses special problems for you, the care giver. You may be exposed to abuse from the impaired person, either verbal or physical. These actions can call up a very wide range of feelings. You may feel a sense of distaste or disgust for a person whom you love. This can make you feel upset and confused. You may also feel both anger and guilt. The impaired person's actions might convince you that the person who was is no longer here. You may decide that you cannot trust the person in public or with any other people. This can cause you to isolate yourself and the person. (Such isolation can have harmful effects on you.)

For all these reasons, if the person in your care begins to act in such ways, call your doctor promptly. The doctor will work with you to set up a treatment plan. Medications may be used to control aggressive or violent behavior. Other techniques may be used to divert or distract the person. The doctor may have ideas about how to cope with other aspects of the problem.

As a care giver, you play a key role in helping your health care team look at and solve these problems. They rely on your detailed reports about the person in your care. And you are the one who will carry out any treatment and care plans.

At the same time, you must find ways to ensure your own well-being. After all, you are the one who will have to cope with the extra work and worry. You will have to live with the problem and with any hurt or embarrassment it may cause. Asking for help may be hard for you. The sexual nature of the problem may make you want to avoid thinking about it or talking about it. The fact is you may need help. Don't be afraid or too shy to ask for *. The rest of this section offers ideas for finding the help you need and for dealing with the problems caused by inappropriate sexual behavior.

Treatment and management

No treatment exists that can root out the cause of inappropriate sexual behavior. You and the care team will seek to manage and control the behavior. Drugs can be used to control sexually aggressive or violent behavior. (See the section in this series dealing with "Aggressive and

Violent Behavior") But with most inappropriate sexual behavior such drugs will not be of much use.

These behaviors pose hard care management problems. At one level, inappropriate sexual behavior is a care problem like wandering, disturbed sleep, repeated questioning, or any other problem. The behavior is caused by the disease. You are faced with a behavior you want to control or stop. But inappropriate sexual behaviors occur in an area that is very delicate and personal for most people. So along with trying to figure out ways to control the problem, you might also be put in situations where you have to deal with embarrassment and shock (yours and other onlookers). You may also find that these behaviors trouble you in a way that other symptoms of the disease don't.

The goal of your care giving task is to ensure that the impaired person's actions do not upset or endanger you or others. Sexual aggression or assault (toward you or anyone else) cannot be allowed. On the other hand, you may find that there is some behavior you can treat as harmless if it occurs at home.

Coping suggestions

Here are some general ideas for managing problems of inappropriate sexual behavior without using drugs. Discuss these ideas with your doctor or nurse and make a plan. Then see what works best. If an idea doesn't seem to be working, call the doctor or nurse back. Discuss the problems you are having and any new ideas you may want to try. Support groups can also be a valuable resource to you. Other members may have ideas, based on their own experiences, for managing the problems you are facing.

Decide what you will do and ...

say when problem behaviors occur. Think about what you will do if the person makes lewd comments, begins to remove clothes, or makes sexual advances. Think through how you will handle inappropriate behaviors should they occur at home, around other adults or in front of children. Try to react calmly and remain composed.

Being prepared will help you stay calm. If you can deal with this in a matter-of-fact way, like any other symptom of the illness, you will be

more able to prevent embarrassment to yourself and others. Depending on the type of behavior and your own response, you may just decide to pay no heed to inappropriate behavior that occurs at home. If an inappropriate sexual behavior does occur in public, explain to any other people involved that the impaired person suffers from a disease that causes brain damage and memory loss. Assure any other people present, especially children, that the impaired person means no harm. Tell them that the person doesn't realize others may be troubled by such actions.

Review daily habit a . . .

of the impaired person. Use any patterns or cues to predict the problem. See if there is a pattern to the impaired person's behavior. For instance, does the behavior occur when the person is upset? Tired? Upon awakening? Can you detect any special behavior that signals the problem is about to occur? Does the person begin fussing with clothes, move closer to another person or move away into a corner?

Distract the impaired person

Find ways to distract the impaired person when the behavior occurs or seems about to occur. Keep a mental or written list of things the person likes, such as going for a walk, listening to music or having a special treat. Try distracting the person with these when you sense a problem is coming. If a problem has already come up, this technique may work less well. Try different ideas to see what works best.

Seek help

Make sure to arrange for regular relief from worry about the problem. Have friends or family members who understand and can deal with the problem take over for you once in a while. Think about hiring help, either in your home or at a respite facility. (You will need to be sure that any helper knows what the problem is and that they can cope with it.)

Living with the problem

If the person in your care begins to act in sexually inappropriate ways, then your care giving role has gotten harder. When such behavior occurs, the impaired person's sexual interest will usually be self-centered. It will likely not be caring or tender. If you are the object of this kind of sexual interest, you may feel torn between wanting to respond and feeling abused. If the person is your sexual partner, you might have to consider

whether you can or want to continue to have sexual relations with him or her. Is this still comfortable for you? Are your needs being met, as well as the other person's? If you decide not to continue, you will probably have to change the home setting. You may, for instance, move to a different bedroom.

The problem also adds to your care giving task. You need to observe the patterns of the problem and to work with your health care team to plan techniques for coping. You need to figure out ways to predict and prevent the problems, if you can. You also need to protect your own safety and peace of mind and that of others who might be involved. Your role as care giver does not include allowing yourself to be hurt or abused by an impaired person.

You may be the one who must plan and manage all of the care for the impaired person. Your role does not require you to do all of the care giving. As with other parts of your care giving task, seek help.

Finally, as in all aspects of your care giving, don't ignore your own needs and feelings. You likely know that the impaired person is not causing problems on purpose. Still, dealing with inappropriate sexual behavior can make you feel any number of ways: embarrassed, angry or depressed, to name a few. Then, too, you may feel guilty for feeling this way. Try to keep in mind that these feelings are not the result of your being a poor care giver. The problems are part of the disease and the care giving role. Other people have been through similar troubles, so do not feel you must keep your problems and reactions to yourself. Speak to a friend or family member, a counselor or member of the clergy or join a support group. (The [Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association](#) may be able to help you find a support group near you. Ask your health care team or a local hospital for a referral.) At times like this, sharing what you feel can be very helpful.