

# PLANNING AN INTERVENTION FOR A DIFFICULT BEHAVIOR

## Suggestions for Helping Someone with Cognitive Impairment

Shelly Weaverdyck

---

### TO KEEP IN MIND

1. A difficult behavior can be **any one's behavior** (such as a caregiver's behavior) that is difficult or distressing to a person with cognitive impairment, or a person with cognitive impairment behavior that is difficult or distressing to someone else, such as a caregiver.
2. In nearly all cases a difficult or distressing behavior is **unintentional**. People aren't aware their behavior is distressing (e.g., they aren't aware the noise they are making is bothering the other person), or they can't control it easily (due to brain changes).
3. A difficult behavior by a person with cognitive impairment usually reflects **distress or an unmet need or desire** (e.g., the need to leave an environment that is too noisy or confusing).
4. It is important to **focus on the distress** rather than simply on the behavior. That is, focus on the **feelings** behind the behavior, or as a result of the behavior (e.g., the fear a person might feel that resulted in their striking another person).
5. Consider the behavior in order to discern the reason for the behavior. Think about what a person is saying and doing to better understand what the cause or trigger of the behavior is and how the person is feeling (e.g., anxiety due to a misinterpretation of what another person said).
6. **Address the cause** or trigger of the behavior and what the person is feeling. For example, remove the noise that is distressing the person, or reassure the person to allay their anxiety, rather than trying to make them stop the behavior. When you address the distress or the cause of behavior, the behavior often is reduced.
7. Consider **who is concerned** or distressed by the behavior. Why are they distressed about the behavior? Try to keep them a part of the process as you work toward resolution. When you are try an intervention, look to see if their distress is reduced. Make their reduced distress part of the goal or criterion of success of the intervention.
8. Consider the **goal of intervention**. Is the behavior causing harm or is it simply emotionally distressing to an observer or a caregiver? If the latter, then it may be more helpful to decrease the distress rather than trying to reduce a behavior. For example, if a daughter is embarrassed by her father's behavior because he used to be very dignified, then it may be more helpful to support the daughter in her changing view of her father now that he is ill, rather than trying to change her father's behavior.
9. As a caregiver, **watch** a person's reaction to your own behavior, movements, and what you say to see if you are unintentionally engaging in a behavior that is distressing or confusing to the person with cognitive impairment.
10. Here is an outline for problem solving, as well as a description of a systematic problem solving approach to use when developing in intervention regarding a difficult behavior. They can be used by a group of caregivers or by an individual.

# **PROBLEM SOLVING OUTLINE FOR A DIFFICULT BEHAVIOR**

## **PROBLEM**

- **Behavior**  
What, when, frequency, who is involved  
Antecedents & consequences
- **Why is the behavior a problem?**  
Who is raising the concern?  
Who is in danger or discomfort?  
Does the behavior need to change? (e.g., can others' exposure or tolerance to the behavior be changed rather than the behavior itself?)

## **GOALS**

- **Identify goals of all involved** (including the person doing the behavior)
- **Identify specific objectives with measurable outcomes**

## **CAUSES**

- **Why is the behavior occurring?**
- **What is the unmet need or desire?**
- **What are the feelings behind the behavior?**
- **Person** (Medical, physical, emotional, cognitive, habits, preferences)
- **Environment**
- **Interaction**
- **Task**

## **STRATEGIES**

- **Results of interventions attempted previously**
- **Brainstorm ideas** (Person, Environment, Interactions, Task)
- **Decide on intervention plan**  
Add or modify objectives  
Define steps and conditions  
Identify who will implement
- **Implement intervention plan**

## **EVALUATION PROCESS & CRITERIA**

- **Identify criteria for success**
- **Communicate with those who saw the behavior as a problem**
- **Ensure distress is resolved**
- **Document results of interventions**
- **Evaluate and revise interventions as necessary**

### **Source:**

Weaverdyck, S. Assessment and Care/Service Plans. In National Alzheimer's Association (Ed.)  
*Key Elements of Dementia Care Manual*. U.S. Alzheimer's Association; Chicago, Illinois, 1997.

# ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION PLAN OUTLINE FOR A DIFFICULT BEHAVIOR

## ASSESSMENT

### 1. Describe Details of the Behavior (Be specific and use objective terms; e.g., Mrs.

S stuck caregiver's shoulder with open hand when the caregiver was leaning over to tie Mrs. S' shoe." rather than "Mrs. S was combative during care.")

- Discern a pattern to the behavior by noting:
  - What occurs
  - Who engages in the behavior
  - When it occurs
  - How often it occurs
  - Who else tends to be involved in the situation
  - Evidence of unmet needs or desires triggering the behavior
- Describe conditions regarding the behavior.
  - What happens before the incident (antecedents)?
  - What happens after the incident (consequences)?
- Document a baseline for a period of time.
  - Document the occurrence and conditions of the behavior over time.

### 2. How much of a problem is the behavior?

- Who is identifying the behavior as a problem?
  - Family member
  - Professional caregiver
  - Person with dementia
- Who actually experiences the behavior as a problem? Who is in physical or other danger/discomfort because of the behavior?
- Can the problem be solved by reducing others' exposure to (or by increasing tolerance of) the behavior rather than changing the behavior itself? (e.g., by addressing caregiver perceptions and tolerance of sexual invitations).
- How serious or challenging is the unmet need or desire?

### 3. Discern why the person is engaging in the behavior (study 1 & 2 above).

- What are the unmet needs or desires of the person engaging in the behavior?
- What are the feelings behind the behavior?
- How are the person's **cognitive deficits** contributing to the behavior? (e.g., is the person misinterpreting the environment or what someone said?)
- Did something in the **environment** trigger or contribute to the behavior? (e.g., is there too much noise or confusion, or is there a change in the environment?)
- Did something in an **interaction** between the person and someone else trigger or contribute to the behavior? (e.g., did the caregiver use sentences that were too long, or did the caregiver move too fast?)
- Is there something about a **task** the person is expected to perform that is too overwhelming or difficult? (e.g., is the person having trouble keeping the order of the task steps straight?)

- Have the person's **preferences, habits, expectations** been affected? (e.g., is the person used to eating breakfast before taking a bath or shower?)
- What role is the person's **medical, physical and emotional health** playing?

#### **4. Identify conditions likely to increase the effectiveness of interventions.**

- Identify successful and unsuccessful interventions attempted in the past.

### **INTERVENTION PLAN**

#### **1. Determine the goal of the intervention.**

- Review the person's own life goals, both long-term and immediate.
- Identify the person's own goal for this behavior.
- Identify other people's goals for this behavior.
- Agree on a primary goal (e.g., the goal may be to increase caregiver tolerance of the behavior rather than to reduce the behavior).

#### **2. Brainstorm intervention ideas.**

- Consider modification of the:
  - environment
  - caregiver interactions with the person
  - tasks presented to the person
- Accommodate the person's own habits, preferences, cognitive status, physical and emotional status.

#### **3. Decide on an intervention plan.**

- Define objectives in very specific terms.
- Define the intervention steps and conditions. (e.g., the caregiver will approach Mrs. S from the front and maintain eye contact).
- Identify the criteria for a successful intervention. (e.g., specify the number of times over a specified period of time, the behavior must occur for the intervention to be seen as effective. How will you know when the intervention is working?)
- Communicate with the person who first raised concern about the behavior and with those for whom the behavior was seen to be a problem. Elicit their reactions regarding the success of the intervention.
- Watch the person who was engaging in the behavior. Has the behavior improved?
- Is the distress resolved and the unmet need or desire met?
- Outline a method of evaluation of the intervention plan.
- Evaluate and revise the intervention plan as needed.

Source: Weaverdyck, S. Assessment and Care/Service Plans. In National Alzheimer's Association (Ed.) *Key Elements of Dementia Care Manual*. Alzheimer's Association; Chicago, Illinois, 1997.