

REPETITIVE BEHAVIOUR

Repetitive actions and repetitive questioning, as with any behaviour, have a cause. Sometimes, it is the result of changes in the brain. In dementia, damage to the front area of the brain can lead to perseveration. With verbal perseveration, the same thing is repeated over and over again, like a music CD that skips. The person with dementia likely has no insight or control over this behaviour.

Possible causes of repetitive behaviour

Side effects of medication. Sometimes the cause of repetitive behaviours, such as a tongue going in and out repeatedly, is a side effect of medication.

Memory loss. The person may not remember having asked the same question or having done the same activity.

Stress and anxiety. This could be due to the person being unable to interpret sights and sounds. They may be unable to remember what has just happened or where a loved one has gone.

Inability to express a need or emotion. Hunger might be expressed by repeatedly asking, "What's for lunch?" Being too warm could be expressed by pulling on one's shirt. The person may be feeling fearful or confused.

Frustration. Perhaps the person is trying to communicate but is not being listened to or is unable to get the message across.

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Inability to understand what is happening. Even the simplest, everyday chores may become unfamiliar to the person, causing them to repeatedly question what is happening.

Boredom. The person may be under-stimulated and is using repetitive behaviours to alleviate their restlessness.

Changes in the brain caused by dementia. As the disease progresses, people with dementia lose the ability to remember what they have just said or done. By repeating themselves, they are trying to gain a bit of control over their lives.

Tips to deal with repetitive behaviour

Stay calm. Use a calm tone of voice. Do not take the behaviour personally. The person with dementia is quite possibly unaware that they are repeating themselves. Take a break whenever possible.

Address the feeling, not the question. Repetitive questioning is often not a need for information but rather a need for reassurance. A hug or gentle touch on the arm or shoulder may help calm the person.

Redirect. Try suggesting a favorite activity, such as a walk or listening to music, to divert the person's attention away from the repetitive behaviour.

Keep it simple. Respond as briefly and simply as possible. Avoid telling the person that they have repeated themselves as this may only serve to upset them. If changes in routine tend to upset the person, try telling them about your

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plans only shortly before the event. Sometimes simply ignoring the behaviour works in time.

Write it down. If the person repeatedly asks the same questions everyday, try posting notes around the house in answer to these questions. For example, “Dinner is at 6pm” and “Your slippers are in the closet”. Use picture cards if the person has lost the ability to read.

Eliminate triggers. If certain objects or activities tend to trigger the person’s repetitive behaviour, try to avoid these situations. For example, if the sight of shoes by the front door always causes the person to start asking, “Is it time to go now?” try storing shoes in a closet.

Brainstorm. Try to think of different memory aids that may help orient the person. Clocks, calendars, and schedules might work. If the caregiver will be away, you could try to record an audio or videotape of the caregiver speaking and giving instructions. Find what works for you.

Replace. If the person is engaging in repetitive movements, try giving them something to occupy their hands and attention, such as a simple puzzle or a stress ball.

Move on. Allow the person sufficient time and then gently encourage them to move on with a soft touch on the arm or by pointing to the next step.

Seek medical advice. Have a physician determine whether the person’s repetitive behaviour may be caused by medication side effects, illness, or other complications.

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