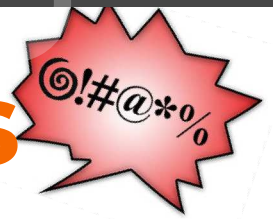


Understanding and dealing with Upsetting Words

when working with people with dementia



What are "upsetting words"?

- This includes swear words and other language that a person might have made an effort not to use when they were well. Some examples include racial or gender slurs, sex-talk and insults.
- Some people think that if a person uses this language when they have dementia, it is because they have always thought this way and it is their "real feelings" being voiced. It is important to know that this is not the case.
- Difficult behaviours in dementia are not "a window into the soul." They are a reflection of brain failure. The person is trying to communicate with what they have left.

Why do people with dementia sometimes use upsetting words?

Sometimes people who never spoke this way will use upsetting words if they have dementia. There are some reasons for this:

1. As the brain fails with dementia, the areas where normal words are stored may be seriously affected, and finding words and communicating become very difficult. The part of the brain where these words are found may be more intact - making these the easiest words for them to locate and use.
2. The parts of the brain that help us to choose better behaviour fail as dementia progresses. Without this filter, and with these words still being available for use, sometimes upsetting language becomes much more prominent for a person with dementia than ever before in their lives.
3. Feeling threatened or frustrated is often a part of their experience, and these feelings can pre-dispose a person to using this language.

Triggers

- There may be triggers that you can identify and remove in order to reduce the chance of someone using these words.
- A change in routine, being over stimulated, feeling disrespected or frustrated could trigger the use of this language. If you see a pattern, you can try to distract or avoid those situations.
- As the disease progresses, it may be harder to identify or remove a trigger. Very often the trigger is visual - seeing a person of colour, or someone carries a few extra pounds, or maybe it's just that these are the most accessible words they have left. At this point, we have to look at what else we can do.

What you can do

- Try speaking in a firm tone and telling them that they cannot use those words. If this causes a conflict, do not use this strategy.
- Choose your reaction - because they cannot choose theirs. Try to ignore the words. Remember that this is a result of brain failure. It may take some time and practice before the words lose their power over your feelings.
- Try modeling better words to help cue them and make those words easier to retrieve.
- Redirect and distract - a change of scenery or activity may help to engage different parts of the brain.
- Give - and take - some space - As long as it's safe, taking a step away to regroup can help you distance your emotions from the words.
- Listen beyond the words - Look at the whole situation. Is there an unmet need? Are they trying to tell you something or reacting to something that you can help with?

Public outbursts

- If you are out in public and this happens, it can be very upsetting. It can be very helpful to carry a card that will help you discretely explain the situation to others. The Alzheimer's Society has printable cards that say "The person I am with has dementia. Your help and understanding is appreciated." Most people will respond with compassion once they understand.
- www.alzheimer.mb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/dementia-card.pdf