

How to Calm Angry Outbursts of People Living with Dementia

Strategies to bring back calm and comfort for you both



One of the most uncomfortable situations for caregivers (or *care partners*, as we call them here at Positive Approach to Care®) are sudden, angry outbursts by people living with dementia.

Often taken by surprise, care partners are left trying to figure out how to calm and resolve the situation. Without the proper skills and knowledge, this can be a daunting task.

Below are a few tips and techniques that you can try next time to help bring back comfort for you both:

Get into *Supportive Stance*

Being aware of your body language can make a big difference in dementia care in general. When it comes to conflict, you'll want to make sure to not stand directly facing the other person, which can come across as confrontational.

Instead, turn your body sideways to the person to get into a non-threatening, *supportive stance*. By turning your body sideways, you're giving the other person some visual space, which makes the situation feel less threatening.

Take a look at the images below, and see which one would feel more comforting to you. The one with Teepa looking straight at you, or the one in supportive stance with her body angled to the side?

Confrontational Stance



Supportive Stance



Confrontational Stance



Supportive Stance



Acknowledge Their Anger

When somebody lashes out verbally or even physically, throwing something or telling you to *shut up*, what we tend to see is people that are loud and intense. Your person living with Alzheimers or another form of dementia may be swearing, or yelling the same phrases repeatedly.

Depending on the severity of the anger, one of the most important things you can do in this situation is to **acknowledge their anger** by using a phrase like *Sounds like you're furious!* By doing so, you're sharing your observation and letting the other person know that you have heard them.

Tip: Did you notice the first three words used in that phrase above? To make responses feel less confrontational, Teepa Snow uses labels as *It sounds like...*, *it seems like...*, or *it looks like...* at the beginning of an observation. Doing this will make your comments feel less like an attack and more like curiosity.

Reflect Their Words and Emotions

With your body positioned in a supportive stance, try mirroring your person's words, expressions, and energy, but with a little less intensity. While you don't want to get loud with them, do try to *get angry along with them* so that they can see you got the message and that you are on their side.

So, if your person were to say *Ugh, I hate this freaking place!*, you may try to respond with *You hate it here!* in a matching energy yet slightly calmer voice.

By reflecting back your person's message in a slightly less angry tone of voice, you're signaling that they've been heard and that you are there for them, while also gently bringing down the intensity.

Example:

- **Valerie:** “This isn’t fair, none of this is fair.”
- **Teepa:** (in a similar but slightly calmer tone) “You’re furious!”
- **Valerie:** “Yeah! None of this is fair. I didn’t do anything.”
- **Teepa:** (in a similar but even calmer tone) “So, it doesn’t feel fair. None of this feels fair.”

Continue reflecting your person’s words, expressions, and emotions with a softer voice until you can feel them calming down.

See If You Can Identify the Trigger

Once you notice your person taking in a deep breath, making more eye contact with you, and calming down a bit, try bringing in a little curiosity to see if you can find out what’s underneath the anger. Why? Because with dementia, we can’t just assume that emotions are always *just* emotions.

While an angry outburst can be caused by emotional or spiritual pain, it can also be triggered by a physical, unmet need that the person is no longer able to communicate. It could be something like their bra strap is turned over and causing a discomfort, or they need to have a bowel movement but don’t remember where the bathroom is.

With a healthy brain, we can either meet those needs ourselves or ask for help. But if a person's brain has been affected by dementia, as explained above, they may not be aware of what is causing the discomfort, let alone be able to describe it.

Take a look at the list below and see if you can find if any of these may have been the culprit:

Emotional Expressions of Need:	Physical Unmet Needs:
Anger	Hunger or thirst
Sadness	Energy level
Loneliness	Elimination (using the restroom)
Fear	Discomfort
Boredom	Pain

Sometimes, anger can also be caused by sensory or social discomfort. Are they missing something that they like to see, or are they seeing something that they don't like? Are they hearing something that they don't like, or could their clothes be scratchy? Could it be that somehow, something isn't feeling okay on them? You may try to move to a different space, or change the social situation (who or what is around them) to see if things improve.

As dementia sets in and abilities decline, remember that a person's ability to express themselves becomes less and less. To reduce the chance of frustration and anger due to miscommunication, try incorporating visual cues whenever you can.

So instead of taking the empty plate off of your person's table assuming they're done, try pairing a visual with your verbal by saying something like *Hey John, are you finished? May I?*, and reaching out your hand suggesting you're ready to take their plate.

Slow down, give your person time to process, and remember that they are doing the best they can with the abilities they have in their current state of brain change.