

Paranoia / Delusions

Understanding paranoia and delusions and some coping strategies

For persons with dementia, it is common that delusions and paranoia will develop at some point, usually in the middle and late stages of dementia. Delusions are false beliefs that usually involve misinterpretation of perceptions or experiences. Paranoia, a form of delusion, is an unrealistic fear or concern that harm is imminent or that others are out to get you. It is important to try and understand that the person with dementia often feels that they have little control over their life and little insight into what is happening around them. It is often easier to blame someone else such as the caregiver for events that they do not understand.

Some common delusions

The person with dementia believes that:

- Others are stealing money or other belongings.
- Uninvited people have been in their home (or are on their way).
- People who are on TV are actually in the room.
- Inanimate objects (like dolls or figurines) are real.
- Their spouse is being unfaithful.
- They are being followed, spied upon, and secretly listened to.

Some behaviour changes that may occur:

- Hoarding/hiding things.
- Accusations and suspiciousness.
- Resistant to others providing care.
- Seeing things that are not real.
- Delusions of grandeur (having extra powers or a position of authority).
- Agitation leading to aggression.

Possible causes

It is important to remember that dementia causes progressive memory loss and can cause visual spatial difficulties. This in turn can cause people to misinterpret what they see and hear.

Possible causes are:

- **Health factors:** If paranoia or delusions are a new behavior, it could be caused by delirium, which is a sudden change in thinking and orientation, usually quite reversible, brought on by a physical condition such as an infection, surgery or other illness.
- **Environmental issues** such as inadequate lighting, sensory overload with too many things going on at once.
- **Changes taking place in the brain** causing loss of judgement and self-control, misunderstanding situations, inability to recognize previously familiar things, or unable to communicate or be understood.

Using the ABC problem solving approach

Antecedent:

First, try to identify the trigger or what is causing the behaviour.

- Observe the person to see if it could be a health problem. Is there sensory impairment?
- Look around the environment to see what is happening. Is it noisy, too many people, too dark?
- Is there a caregiving issue?

Behaviour:

Observe and listen. Try to name the behaviour. Was it paranoid or grandiose delusions? Is the behaviour actually a problem?

Consequence:

Assess reasons for the delusions and paranoia; think about appropriate referrals such as family physician, geriatrician, and mental health resources. Remember that how you handle the issue may determine whether the outcome will be a positive one. Try to remove the trigger and/or change your response to the behaviour. Paranoia and delusions may be harmless if they do not upset the person with dementia. There may be no reason to intervene.

What to try

The person with dementia may be unaware that their memory is poor and with no memory of recent events, explanations do not make sense. If the behaviour seems to be distressing the person, some suggestions are to:

- Stay calm and speak in a calm voice.
- Calmly state the truth, and avoid arguing with the person you care for.
- Look for an immediate cause or trigger (antecedent) and try to remove if possible.
- Use distraction, redirect their attention to an activity that is familiar and may be done unassisted.
- Look beyond the behaviour to determine why there are false ideas. Try to address the underlying feeling while using reassurance.
- Help build a comfortable environment by integrating soothing activities into the daily routine.
- Offer to help look for a ‘misplaced’ item as suspicion often arises when the person believes something to be missing.

How to prevent:

- Arrange for a medical check-up to eliminate the presence of other physical or psychiatric problems, assess vision and hearing, and to check the effects of medication.
- Try to maintain a daily routine for the person with dementia. This will help provide consistency and familiarity and increase their feelings of security.
- If they are paranoid about money it is best to put a system in place ahead of time that documents transactions and use reassurance.
- If they are misplacing things and make accusations of stealing, try to learn the person’s common hiding places. If possible, keep a spare set of things that are often mislaid such as keys, purse or glasses.
- Increase lighting in the home especially in the late afternoon and evening and use night lights.
- Investigate suspicions to check their accuracy. They may be true!

- Do not take the accusations personally and be aware that the person is not able to control this behaviour.

Communication strategies that may help

- If something is missing, acknowledge their feelings and offer to help them look for the object. Then at some point, redirect their attention to something else.
- Use “I” language to engage in conversation and focus on the feelings. It will help reduce conflict and prevent defensive behaviours. An example would be saying, “I can see that you are upset. Let me help you.”
- Don’t argue or directly disagree with a false idea. State what you know is true, then try to distract the person (e.g., “Let’s go for a walk”).
- Don’t agree with the person that you did something that you didn’t. The best strategy is to listen attentively and when they are finished, let them know that you are sorry they feel this way and gently try to change the subject.
- Explain things calmly and in simple sentences, allowing the person more time to respond than they would have needed before the dementia.
- Avoid laughing or whispering near the person. This may be misinterpreted.
- Unfortunately, paranoid delusions can lead to aggression, so if gentle redirection isn't helpful, it's important to get professional help.

Things to keep in mind

Dealing with delusions day in and day out is not easy. Patience, understanding, and listening are the best strategies. If you find yourself unable to cope you may need to take yourself out of the environment for a short period of time and seek respite. It is essential that you seek support for yourself. Contact your local Alzheimer Society. They will be able to direct you to helpful resources as well as provide you with information and support.

Resource:

- Delusions and Hallucinations Fact Sheet: www.alzheimerbc.org

This fact sheet was provided courtesy of the Alzheimer Society of Ottawa and Renfrew County