

Verbal Aggression

Why does it happen?

Always consider first:

Does the person have an unmet need that they are trying to communicate to you?

How the person's health could contribute to verbal aggression

- Physical changes in the person's brain could result in the parts of their brain that should regulate their behaviour deteriorating or no longer functioning. Changes in the person's brain may also affect the person's hearing (reduced hearing and/or distorted sound), which could affect the volume of their speech (resulting in routine shouting or screaming).
- The person's communication skills may have diminished due to their dementia, leaving them with a more limited vocabulary, or they may be repeating language that they've heard in their earlier life or words that they feel a strong association with, like swear words.
- The person may have an undiagnosed health condition (physical or mental) that is causing them to express themselves in this way – For example, sudden and acute verbal aggression may be attributable to an infection.
- The person may not be able to explain that they are experiencing the side-effect(s) of medicine(s), which may lead to verbal aggression around taking medicines.
- The person may have undiagnosed pain that they are trying to alert you to.

How the Person's Feelings and Emotions Could Contribute to Verbal Aggression:



- The person may be using verbal aggression as a way of releasing the frustration they feel – many people with dementia have some insight into their deteriorating cognition, making them feel frustrated at not being able to express themselves as they once did, or frustration through being unable to complete a task that used to be part of their daily life, like making a drink or a sandwich.
- The person may be feeling insecure, confused, angry, upset or bored.

- The person may be using verbal aggression to express a feeling of being frightened or threatened, either in this present moment or because of something that they fear will happen to them imminently. This expression of being frightened or threatened may also come from hallucinations that the person is having, or from memories they are recalling of an earlier part of their life that was distressing for them.
- The person may be feeling embarrassed or stressed – For example, during personal care.
- The person may be feeling they no longer have control over themselves and/or their life, and may feel they are not being listened to or understood.
- The combination of the person's learning disability and their dementia may be causing them additional stress, anxiety or uncontrollable emotions that they can only express in verbal aggression.



How the Person's Daily Life Could Contribute to Verbal Aggression

- The person's environment, even if it was previously familiar to them, may now feel hostile due to the person's dementia – For example, the person may be trying to make themselves heard in a noisy environment, or they may be experiencing sensory overload if there is a lot happening around them
- The company of a particular individual or individuals, even someone they were once happy to share their time and space with, may now irritate the person due to their dementia affecting their perceptions of that individual
- The person may no longer be comfortable with their routine – For example, the person may not want to go to a certain place, or see a particular individual, but cannot express this in any other way but through verbal aggression whenever the topic is raised or the person is due to be somewhere that they don't want to be



Ways to Support the Person

Staff Approach

- Be polite when responding to verbal aggression – do not shout or swear back at the person.
- Remove yourself from the situation, if necessary and without endangering the person, if you feel unable to remain calm and control your response.
- Do not take verbal aggression personally. It is important to recognise that verbal aggression is usually because of a person's unmet need(s).
- Don't allow a person's verbal aggression to put you off spending time with them unless the person doesn't want to spend time with you – in positive circumstances, quality time with the person may actually alleviate their verbal aggression, or allow you to understand it better.

Think about Unmet Needs

- How comfortable is the person? For example, are they the right temperature, happy in their clothing and with their personal appearance, not hungry, thirsty, in need of their medicines, tired, constipated or otherwise unwell?
- If the person is less mobile, be mindful that if the person has been sitting for too long they may have become uncomfortable, frustrated, bored or distressed because they need the toilet or feel they need to be somewhere.
- Does the person have free access to occupation and activity? For example, is the person being supported to engage in their hobbies and interests when they want to, or access new meaningful activities that engage them physically and/or mentally to prevent boredom?
- Equally, does the person have access to relaxation and, if they want to, the opportunity to access the outside world and nature, which may be a calming experience for them? Be aware that over-stimulation or under-stimulation can lead to verbal aggression.
- Review how well you are supporting the person with their choice and control. Do they have every opportunity they could have to exercise their choice and control, or are they feeling like they are having to fight for everything?
- Think about the emotional support that the person has, or might need - is there something missing that could lead the person to feel insecure?

Understanding the Person's Health Needs

- Rule out any undiagnosed physical or mental health conditions or undiagnosed pain. If you are not sure, support the person to see their doctor.
- Ensure that the person's hearing and eyesight is checked regularly. Poor hearing could result in the person mishearing something and reacting with verbal aggression, and poor eyesight could lead to the person not recognising their surroundings, increasing any feelings of insecurity.
- Review medicines regularly.
- Review the Treatments module in the Wellbeing for Life toolkit for ideas of non-pharmacological interventions that may help to support the person.

Changing Daily Life



- Think about the environment that you are in with the person when verbal aggression is demonstrated - is it hostile for the person? For example, is the person's environment too noisy, too busy, or the opposite, so quiet that the person feels unnerved by the silence and is trying to fill it ? *Keep a log of when and where the verbal aggression is happening to help you spot patterns. A PBS Coach can help you to develop this.*
- If the person's verbal aggression is particularly related to night times, consider the person's bedroom environment – the bedroom may frighten the person in the dark (a nightlight may help to reassure the person and potentially change the layout of the room if there are any frightening shadows). *For more information on supporting a person with changed behaviour at night times, see the factsheet 'Wakefulness and Disturbed Sleeping.'*

Changing Daily Life

- Think about interpersonal relationships - is the person's verbal aggression associated with a particular member of staff or one of their peers? If you believe it could be, think about supporting the person in a way that minimises the contact that they have with someone who they have a negative association with
- Conversely, are the times when the person isn't verbally aggressive associated with being in a particular place or with a particular individual or group? If you believe this is the case, explore what is making that environment/that individual/group comforting for the person, and ways you might be able to replicate those positive circumstances to help minimise future episodes of verbal aggression.
- Consider if the person's routine is still meeting their needs, or whether it might actually be contributing to their verbal aggression.



Finding Patterns and Problem Solving

- Think about the circumstances that lead up to the person's verbal aggression - is there something that you can change in the support you, or colleagues, are providing that could prevent future episodes of verbal aggression? This may be particularly relevant in situations where personal care is leading to verbal aggression. Think about your approach and the way you are communicating with the person and involving them
- Understand the person and their history – by researching their life story, you may find clues to explain and/or alleviate their verbal aggression
- Think about every aspect of the person's communication, not just their verbal aggression - there may be hints as to any unmet needs the person has from their body language or gestures. Do not forget: *a PBS Coach to help you to find patterns and understand the meaning behind the behaviour.*



*Consider the person's history
and life story*



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