



Physical 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 Physical 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.
- The person's communication skills may have diminished due to their dementia, leaving them frustrated at being unable to express themselves, leading to the person 'lashing out'.
- Changes in the person's eyesight may affect what they are seeing, leading to the person lashing out at someone or something that they didn't intend to hit.
- 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 physical 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 physical 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 Physical Aggression

- The person may be using physical 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 physical 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 physical aggression.

How the Person's Daily Life could Contribute to Physical 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 not recognise where they are, or they may be experiencing sensory overload if there is a lot happening around them. This could then lead to the person becoming physically aggressive with objects or furniture that they feel are in their way.
- 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. This could lead to the person lashing out at this individual or individuals.
- 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 physical 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

- When a person is physically aggressive you need to protect the person and yourself from harm.

If this is the first time a person has been physically aggressive then:

- Give the person physical space and ask others to do the same helping other people out of the room if necessary. Even if the person usually enjoys physical contact do not initiate this as they may understand this as physical aggression from you.
- Try to remove the reason for their physical aggression or distract the person. For example: If the person clearly wants something and it is possible to give it to them then do so. If there is something or someone present who they may be finding threatening then remove them. Reassure the person in a calm and understanding way. Offer them a favorite item, food or drink if you know these things are motivating to them.
- You have a Duty of Care to do your best to keep the person and others safe. You should always try to do this without using any form of physical intervention but if there is immediate danger to a person or you are being hurt and cannot get away then use the minimum contact you can to make the situation safe. You must report any incident of unplanned physical intervention to your manager immediately.
- After an incident, the person may need some time and space, which you should aim to safely facilitate for them.

Ways to Support the Person

Staff Approach Continued...

- Always report any incident of physical aggression to your manager and on an incident form / AssessNet so that the behaviour can be monitored and action taken to keep everyone safe in the future. After reporting the incident contact your local PBS Coach, or a Lead PBS Coach for support. They will help you to develop a PBS plan for the person for you to follow if there are any future incidents of physical aggression. If necessary they may also support you to access training in physical intervention.
- If the person has been physically aggressive before then a PBS plan should be in place which will give you person specific support on how proactively support the person to reduce the chances of them needing to use physical aggression and how to respond if physical aggression does occur. It is essential that you read their PBS plan and follow this consistently. The behaviour of a person with dementia may continue to change so contact your PBS Coach again if you think the plan needs reviewing.
- 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 physical aggression personally. It is important to recognise that physical aggression is usually because of a person's unmet need(s). Don't allow a person's physical 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 physical aggression, or allow you to understand it better.

Think about Unmet Needs

- How comfortable is the person? For example, are they happy in their clothing and with their personal appearance, not hungry, thirsty, in need of their medicines, tired, constipated or otherwise unwell? Be aware of the person's temperature and bear in mind that some people respond negatively to being too warm, either as a result of heating or summer weather, which may make their temper shorter and potentially lead to physical aggression.
- 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? Physical activity/exercise may be particularly important if the person is able to participate in this, as it may help the person to release their energy in a positive and constructive way, but be aware that overstimulation can also lead to physical aggression so it's important to get the balance right.

Think about Unmet Needs

Think about Unmet Needs Continued...

- 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?
- 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
- Ensure that the person's eyesight and hearing is checked regularly - poor eyesight could lead to the person not realising how close someone or something is to them when they lash out, and poor hearing could result in the person responding physically to something they have misheard
- 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 physical aggression is demonstrated - is it hostile for the person? For example, is the person's environment too noisy or too busy, or is the space the person is in quite small, which may feel claustrophobic. Also consider in this context how the person might be perceiving time and space now – are they lashing out because they believe they have space around them when they actually don't?
- Think about interpersonal relationships - is the person's physical 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 physically 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 physical aggression.
- Consider if the person's routine is still meeting their needs, or whether it might actually be contributing to their physical aggression.

Finding Patterns and Problem Solving

- Think about the circumstances that lead up to the person's physical aggression - is there something that you can change in the support you, or colleagues, are providing that could prevent future episodes of physical aggression? This may be particularly relevant in situations where personal care is leading to physical aggression – think about your approach and the way you are communicating with the person and involving them. Personal care is a very intimate activity, and a person with dementia may become physically aggressive if they are feeling threatened or don't recognise the staff supporting them (even if they have worked with these staff members for a long time).
- Understand the person and their history – by researching their life story, you may find clues to explain and/or alleviate their physical aggression.
- Think about every aspect of the person's communication, not just their physical aggression - there may be hints as to any unmet needs the person has from their verbal communication, body language or gestures.



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