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Tearfulness: Being Emotional

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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 Tearfulness and/or Being Emotional

- Physical changes in the person's brain could result in the parts of their brain that should regulate their emotions deteriorating or no longer functioning.
- Many people become tearful or emotional when reacting to upsetting life events, but this may be more acute for a person with a learning disability who then develops dementia. Many mental health conditions can also affect a person's emotional state and their ability to cope with emotional situations.
- The person's communication skills may have diminished due to their dementia, leaving them frustrated and upset at being unable to express themselves.
- The person may have an undiagnosed health condition (physical or mental) that is causing them to become emotional, particularly if they are unable to explain what is causing them discomfort or pain.
- If the person is aware they are unwell, they may become upset about this and fearful of becoming very ill, needing to go into hospital, or dying.
- The person may not be able to explain that they are experiencing the side-effect(s) of medicine(s), which may lead to becoming tearful or emotional around taking medicines.

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How the Person's Feelings Could Contribute to Tearfulness and/or Being Emotional

- A person with dementia retains a strong sense of their emotions, making the person more likely to react to the emotional aspects of an interaction or situation.
- The person may have some insight into their dementia and awareness of their declining cognition, leading the person to feel a sense of loss and frustration 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 and vulnerable as a result of confusion or other dementia related symptoms**.**
- The person may be upset because they feel 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 through tearfulness.

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How the Person's Daily Life Could Contribute to Tearfulness and/or Being Emotional

- 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 become upset if they cannot find their own way to the toilet or their bedroom.

- The company of a particular individual or individuals, even someone they were once happy to share their time and space with, may now upset the person due to something that may have been said to the person or the person's 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 becoming tearful or emotional.

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Ways to Support the Person

Staff Approach

- Respond with gentleness, kindness and compassion, comforting the person and using touch if appropriate for that individual.
- Your response should always be fresh and as though it is the first time you have offered it, not something you offer begrudgingly because of multiple instances of emotional outbursts.
- Give the person time - if you try to rush to make the person feel better, you may only succeed in airbrushing over how they are feeling, rather than genuinely alleviating what is upsetting them.
- Be sympathetic as you try to discover what might be causing the person you support to feel emotional, and if appropriate, validate the person's emotions ("I understand how difficult this is for you").

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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?

- 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? Also think about how the person maintains social contact that is important to them to prevent them becoming isolated and lonely which may make the person upset.

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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? Losing choice and control can lead to feelings of worthlessness and increased dependence that then become a vicious circle.

- Think about the emotional support that the person has, or might need - is there something missing that could lead the person to feel insecure? Consider if the person needs an emotional prop, something like a favourite item, cushion or blanket - anything that the person responses positively to that they can cuddle, interact with and that calms them.

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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.
- 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 - many non-medicine therapies have a strong emphasis on creating a calm and relaxing experience for the person.

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Changing Daily Life

- Be aware of the person's environment and how that might be contributing negatively to their emotional wellbeing, perhaps through seeing an image that upsets the person or an item that reminds the person of something negative. Remember that what items actually are, and how the person perceives them, can be two different things.

- Ensure that the person's orientation is supported by having appropriate dementia friendly signage (to help the person navigate their way to the toilet etc) – this will help to support the person's independence.

- Think about interpersonal relationships - is the person's tearfulness or emotional outbursts 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 tearful or emotional 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 tearfulness or being emotional.

- Consider if the person's routine is affecting their emotional state – For example, is there someone they regularly see or a place they regularly go that is a trigger for their emotional upset? If you make this connection, sensitively explore with the person, and anyone else involved, how the emotional impact might be minimised. It may be the case that an individual reminds the person of someone they once knew, leading to emotional distress for the person.

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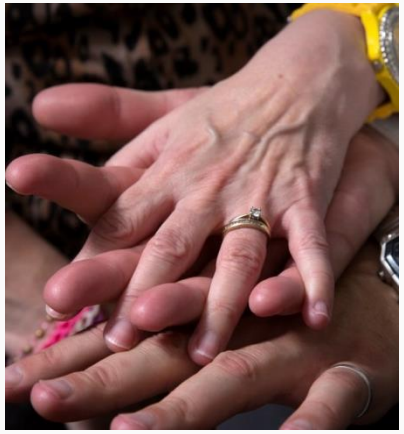
Finding Patterns and Problem Solving

- Think about the circumstances that lead up to the person's tearfulness or when they are emotional - is there something that you can change in the support you, or colleagues, are providing that could prevent future episodes of tearfulness or being emotional?

- Understand the person and their history – by researching their life story, you may find clues to explain and/or alleviate their tearfulness or emotional responses.

- Think about every aspect of the person's communication, not just their tearfulness - there may be hints as to any unmet needs the person has from their verbal communication, body language or gestures.



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https://www.bethbritton.com/

602 South Seventh Street
Central Milton Keynes
MK9 2JA
www.macintyrecharity.org