

DELUSIONS

Delusions are fixed beliefs that are not based on reality and remain persistent despite all evidence to the contrary. A delusion cannot be altered by logical arguments or discussion. For example, the person might be convinced that their spouse of twenty years is not their spouse at all and no amount of time spent looking at wedding pictures and family albums can change his/her mind.

Paranoia is a common aspect of delusions, resulting from a decreasing ability to separate fact from fiction. For example, the person might become certain that others are stealing or hiding things from them, or plotting against them. Fact-based, reasonable explanations will have no impact on the person's paranoia.

Delusions in people with dementia are caused by damage to the areas of the brain that make judgements and separate fiction from reality. Other possible causes for delusions include: medications, hormone interactions, medication overdoses, psychiatric illness concurrent with dementia, physical illness such as infections, possible head trauma, or elevated stress. Poor memory can also be a contributing factor in paranoia; since the person with dementia cannot remember where he/she put things, objects may seem to disappear mysteriously.

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Strategies to deal with delusions:

Do not argue. You will never win, you will not change the person's opinion and you will likely worsen the situation by making the person more agitated, angry and confused.

Consult your physician. The delusion could be caused by a physical or mental illness, or medication interactions or side effects. Your physician may prescribe medication to control or lessen the symptoms of paranoia. Have the person checked for a possible fall or vision changes.

Distract or redirect. Try to steer the person away from their delusion. Distract them with a treat or redirect them to an activity, such as going for a walk or folding the laundry.

Address feelings. Validate their feelings ("I can see that you are upset by this"). Comfort and reassure the person with a kind word or a hug, if the person is willing to be touched. You can also hand them a favorite object, or bring them to familiar surroundings to provide a sense of security.

Offer help. Try to help resolve the issue that is troubling the person. For example, if the person is accusing you of stealing their wallet, offer to help look for it (check all the person's usual hiding places).

Ignore the delusion. When a delusion is not causing harm to the person with dementia or anyone else, you can simply choose to ignore it.

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Reinforce daily routine. Routines help reassure the person by providing a sense of the familiar. Reinforcing aspects of the daily routine, such as meal times, a walk in the afternoon, and bedtime, can provide a sense of security.

Replace missing object. It is often easier to look around the house on a regular basis and replace a missing object before the person notices that it is missing.

Do not whisper. Do not discuss the person with dementia as if they are not there and do not whisper in front of them. These actions can provoke and worsen their paranoia.

Look before discarding. Check wastebaskets before emptying them for objects that should not be discarded.

Reduce potential hiding places. Eliminate clutter and lock unused areas.

Make note of the circumstances that precede the delusions. Try to notice if the delusions happen at a particular time of day, in certain places, with certain objects, or with particular people. If it appears as though something specific is triggering the delusions, try avoiding these situations or provide distractions by involving the person in a comforting activity just prior to these moments.

Investigate suspicions. For example, the person with paranoia may actually be a victim of someone stealing a wallet or watch. Check first.

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