

Sundowning

Sundowning is a word that is often used to describe when older adults become confused in the afternoon or evening and start to show agitated, aggressive, or wandering behaviors.

No one knows for sure why sundowning happens. The good news is that there are things you can do to lessen the effects of sundowning.

Trigger Reduction

Often, difficult behaviors are your loved one's way of trying to communicate that they have an unmet need, are overstimulated, or are uncomfortable. By identifying what might be wrong, or what the trigger is, you can help prevent difficult behaviors by reducing these triggers.

If you are not sure what the trigger is, you can try different things to see if they help. For example:

- They might be cold. Offer them a warm blanket.
- They might be hungry. Offer them a snack.
- They might be scared of the dark. Turn on a night light or lamp.
- They might be tired. Invite them to take a break and rest.

Routine Establishment

A stable routine means that on most days, your loved one will do the same activities at the same time. Routines can give your loved one a sense of comfort and safety, and also help them cope with their day more effectively. When routines are unstable, your loved one has to use their energy to deal with anxiety related to changes that they are not prepared for. Often, this will result in unwanted behaviors or withdrawing. Here are some things to consider when establishing a routine:

- Schedule a regular bedtime and wake up time
- Schedule regular meals, hydration, and medication
- Schedule regular toileting
- Include enough downtime and rest throughout their day
- Include enjoyable activities like reading the newspaper or listening to music
- Include purposeful activities like chores, spiritual practices, or calling their children
- Include time spent outdoors and for physical activity, such as a walk or stretches

If your loved one struggles with sundowning, make sure they are actively engaged earlier in the day. Be mindful of not exhausting them. Give them enough time to wind down and rest as needed. You can help them wind down by eliminating caffeine after lunchtime, limiting or eliminating alcohol, and scheduling bedtime earlier. If they are someone who would benefit from an afternoon nap, you can encourage them to do so.

Environment Set Up

Your loved one might be triggered by things in their environment. Often, simple changes to their environment can make a big difference. You can do this by:

- Reducing noise and turning off the TV or radio
- Moving your loved one to another room with less people
- Turning on the lights and opening the curtains during the day
- Turning down the lights and closing the curtains during the evening
- Giving your loved one enough personal space

If your loved one's behavior is escalating and they are becoming aggressive, set up the environment to help them calm down. You can do this by:

- Turning down the lights
- Playing soft music
- Using lavender scented products or other comforting scents specific to your loved one
- Giving your loved one enough personal space
- Moving your loved one to another room with less people
- Removing items that may become dangerous

Redirecting

Redirecting your loved one to an engaging activity can help them get into a different state of mind and reduce unwanted behaviors. Many people respond well to repetitive tasks, such as:

- Sorting or folding laundry
- Opening the mail
- Drying dishes
- Organizing items by color, size, or shape

In addition to using these strategies, you can also talk to your loved one's doctor about sundowning.