

Catastrophic Reactions

A catastrophic reaction is the emotional and behavioral reaction to a situation that either overwhelms or creates stress on the individual experiencing dementia because the situation (or stimulus) is beyond the person's ability to comprehend.

What does a catastrophic reaction look like?

a swift change in mood stubbornness
 weeping anxiety
 blushing fear
 anger pacing
 agitation hand wringing
 verbal and physical aggression wandering
 outbursts of laughter or screaming

What triggers a catastrophic reaction?

- ◆ being asked to think about too much at once
- ◆ a request or question that is too complicated
- ◆ feeling of insecurity, fear
- ◆ sudden change
- ◆ misinterpretation of person, place or thing
- ◆ small accident, (e.g. spilled water glass)
- ◆ unfamiliar or sudden noises
- ◆ bad weather
- ◆ TV
- ◆ other peoples behaviors (your mood, irritation etc.)
- ◆ unfamiliar surroundings or people
- ◆ change in routine
- ◆ change in environment
- ◆ being talked about and not to
- ◆ physical discomfort

Remember

Alzheimer's disease (AD) will gradually decrease an individual's ability to comprehend and use written or spoken words, know the correct day, date, time or place and to use proper judgment. Individuals with AD may display more rapid mood swings for no apparent reason. The person's personality may also change with time. Therefore, it is important to take into consideration the person's cognitive level when problem solving.

Some helpful suggestions

Assess the situation

- ◆ Review what happened just before, during and after the behavior.
- ◆ Who was involved, time of day, location?
- ◆ What was the person doing, or being asked to do?
- ◆ Look for a message and a pattern to the behavior.

Reassure

- ◆ When able, hold hands, play comforting music, dim lights, turn off TV, verbally reassure with statements like "I am right here if you need me", "Everything will be alright" and "You're safe here." Do not discount fears.
- ◆ *Remain calm*-slow your speech and make eye contact

Redirect attention

- ◆ The person's diminishing short-term memory may help them to move on after the event. A touch of the hand may do the trick to guide them to another task.

Simplify daily activities

- ◆ Create and follow a daily routine.
- ◆ Do not test the resident's memory about events and people.
- ◆ Offer one choice at a time.

Don't make an issue of mishaps

- ◆ After the incident, attempt to calm the person down.

Remove the person from the stressful situation or remove the stressful situation from them

- ◆ Do not hurry, push, or pull the person.

Remember...

Tactics that worked today may not work tomorrow.

Catastrophic reactions are related to brain damage.

Catastrophic reactions are not a reflection on you or on your caregiving abilities.

Alzheimer's Disease Resource Agency of Alaska
1750 Abbott Rd.
Anchorage, AK 99507
907-561-3313 or
toll-free within Alaska 1 (800) 478-1080