

Family Connect

Managing Bathing Challenges

The Facts

- Over 90% of people with dementia become agitated when they are told it is time for a bath.
- 41-73% of the individuals living at care facilities show disruptive, agitated, or resistive behaviors during bathing.
- Behavioral and environmental approaches can promote comfort and reduce the risk of agitation.

Bathing Challenges for Caregivers

Set routines, lack of time, and poor understanding of bathing or of the behaviors create challenges for the caregivers.

- The caregiver may not use a person-centered approach (see pg. 3); instead, bathing is *done to* the individual.
- Lack of time makes bathing a task to be done, instead of understanding it as a therapeutic experience for the individual.
- Caregivers may not understand that behaviors such as withdrawal, resistance, or combativeness are attempts at self-protection from a perceived threat.
- Physically and verbally aggressive behaviors have negative effects on caregivers, including caregiving-related stress, lowered morale, frustration and dissatisfaction with caregiving, burn-out, and avoidance of the individual.

Bathing Challenges for Older Adults with Dementia

A person with dementia often have unpleasant experiences during bathing, resulting in self-protective behaviors.

- Removal of clothing and nudity may cause fear and embarrassment.
- Bathing rooms are often impersonal, uncomfortable, and unpleasant (cold, noisy, institutional).
- Activities like showering or using lifts may seem unfamiliar and frightening.
- Multiple caregivers, especially strangers, may overstimulate the individual.
- Pain during movement and other discomforts (e.g., water in eyes) can lead to problems.
- Loss of control leaves the individual feeling confused, dominated, or insulted.
- The individual may be unable to understand that the caregiver is trying to be helpful.
- Persons may feel frustrated by not being able to bathe themselves.
- They may anticipate pain or unpleasant feelings.
- They may not want to be touched or receive assistance and may feel that their personal space is being invaded.

Assessment Before Bathing

Know the bathing history

- How does this person usually bathe (shower, tub, sponge bath)?
- When does the person usually bathe (e.g., morning before dressing, evening before bedtime, Saturday night before Sunday church)?
- How often does the person bathe (daily, weekly)?
- Are there other personal preferences or habits that make bathing more enjoyable (e.g., soaps, scents, cleansing routines)?
- When is the person alert, least stressed, and most likely to be cooperative?
- What seems to cause fear (e.g., water in face, stepping into tub)?

Consider current abilities and needs

- What can the person do?
- How much and what type of help is needed?
- What type of equipment is most appropriate?

Consider adjustments to approaches

- Wash hair another day at beauty or barber shop.
- Use non-rinse soap or shampoo.
- Pat dry instead of rubbing.
- Schedule pain medication before bathing.

Making the bathing environment friendly

- Check for comfortable room and water temperature.
- Reduce/eliminate noise (e.g., running water, loud talking, echo from tiles, multiple people in room).
- Decorate or provide home-like touches (e.g., attractive shower curtain, drapes, beach towels on walls to buffer noise).
- Change physical environment (e.g., replace tub with lift tub that has an easy access panel door; use shower chair with padded seat and footrests).
- *See pg. 4 for additional tips on how to make the bathing environment friendly*

Shift the focus from the task to the person.

Enhance Comfort and Cooperation

- Be flexible instead of insisting on a set routine.
- Know the therapeutic value of bathing.
- Practice person-centered care: view the individual as a whole person.
- Empathize with the person's experience of bathing.
- Allow choices and privacy. Provide a same gender caregiver if possible.
- Keep directions simple and reduce stimuli. Allow the individual to use their own abilities whenever possible.



Person-Centered Bathing Process for Persons with Dementia

Promote person-centered bathing using the Three F's of Bathing and the PRIDE Approach.

Three F's of Bathing

Function: What function does bathing serve (e.g., to reduce body odors)?

Form: What form of bathing best meets current needs (e.g., towel bath, shower, tub)?

Frequency: How frequently does this person need to be bathed to meet individual needs?

PRIDE Approach

PRIVACY: Maintain privacy and dignity at all times.

- Undress the individual in the bathing room. Close the door and pull privacy curtains.
- Keep body parts covered with blankets or towels unless being washed.

REASSURANCE: Provide reassurance to promote comfort and safety.

- Talk to the individual. Check for comfort and unmet needs (e.g., "How does that feel?").
- Ask how the person is feeling and doing. Offer encouragement and support (e.g. "You are doing great!" "You smell so good.").
- Encourage individual involvement. Provide only needed assistance (e.g., gently guide their hands).
- Use a calm, personal, unhurried approach. Have only one caregiver provide baths.
- If two caregivers are needed, have one provide reassurance and support while the other washes (e.g., the "good guy/bad guy" approach (Sloan, 1995) or the "buddy system" (Martin, 1999)).

INFORMATION: Offer information about what is happening and why.

- Assume the person has the ability to understand. Offer a reason for bathing (e.g., "Let's get you cleaned up for your company.").
- Explain what you are doing step-by-step. Break bath chores into steps and use simple cues.
- Gently guide if unable to respond to verbal cues (e.g., touch then put pressure behind knees while asking person to sit). Give the individual control by letting them perform self-care.
- Offer choices (e.g., "Do you want to unbutton your shirt, or should I?").

DISTRACTIONS: Use distractions to reduce anxiety and gain cooperation.

- Soft, familiar recorded music or singing a song may reduce agitation.
- Reminisce about the individual's family, history, or favorite activities.
- Use aromatherapy, such as bath oils. Offer choices of scents.
- Keep the individual's hand busy holding a washcloth or other soft item.

EVALUATION: Evaluate comfort, safety, and cleanliness.

- Adjust times and routines to accommodate the person.
- Work with others to problem-solve difficult bathing situations.
- Implement the buddy system and other methods to promote dignity.
- Record recommendations and instructions for others to promote continuity and quality of care.
- Slow down and re-evaluate if resistance or signs of discomfort appear.
- Remember: No one suffers if the bath isn't given today; try another time if the individual resists.

How to Create a Friendly Bathing Environment

Preparing for the Bath

Anticipate the needs of the individual and tailor the bathing process beforehand. This will help things to go smoothly.

Taking the person to the bathing area: A negative experience while moving to the bathing area will set the tone for the remainder of the bath.

- Use comfortable and appropriate modes to move (shower chair, wheelchair, walking).
- Keep the individual warm and well-covered.

Have the bathing area prepared *before* the person arrives.

- Keep everything warm (room, water, towels, blankets).

Improving the Bathing Experience

A good environment will make the bathing experience more calming and beneficial.

Bathing rooms often become storage areas for extra supplies.

- Move extra, unnecessary supplies and equipment to another location.
- Use colorful screens or curtains to hide supplies or add extra cupboards.
- Use a shelving unit with baskets of personal toiletries.

Poor lighting on tiles can cause glare and can distress the individual.

- Use cover lighting or wall sconces to redirect light.
- Have lights on dimmer switches for easy adjustment.

Eliminate offensive smells by removing soiled linens immediately, and use scented disinfectants.

Flooring can be dangerous and cold when wet.

- Use washable non-slip rugs for entering/exiting the tub or shower.

Keep the person warm throughout the bathing process.

- Towel and blanket warmers should be kept nearby.
- The temperature of the room should be higher than usual.
- Add a heat lamp or radiant heat panels to provide extra heat.

Be creative with home-like touches by adding familiar and soothing elements to the room.

- Add colorful wall hangings, posters, murals, or shower curtains.
- Decorate shelves with bottles, towels, and other ceramic objects.
- Provide a vanity as a seating area and “finishing” spot, with personal toiletries (e.g., makeup) to help the person complete the bathing process and feel at home.

References

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3. Mickus, M.A., et al. (2002). Developing effective bathing strategies for reducing problematic behavior for resident with dementia: The PRIDE approach. *Journal of Mental Health and Aging*, 8(1), 37-43.
4. Sloan, P.D., et al. (1995). Bathing persons with dementia. *The Gerontologist*, 3(5), 672-678.