

Australian version

iSupport For Dementia

Training and support manual
for carers of people with dementia



Unit 4. How to respond to repetitive behaviour

Repetitive behaviour, things a person does over and over

Repetitive behaviours can include repeating a sound, a word, a question or an action (for example, tapping fingers).

Why is this learning unit important?

If a person repeats things over and over it can be stressful for the person with dementia and the carer. We refer to this as 'repetitive behaviour'.

Understanding the reasons behind specific behaviours can help carers cope.

How will this learning unit help me?

This learning unit will help you to understand why this happens and how to respond and reduce it.

What will I learn?

- Repetitive behaviour is common in people with dementia.
- What may increase repetitive behaviours and how to change this.
- Different ways to comfort a person with dementia who maybe using repetition in response to a particular issue or situation.

What is repetitive behaviour?

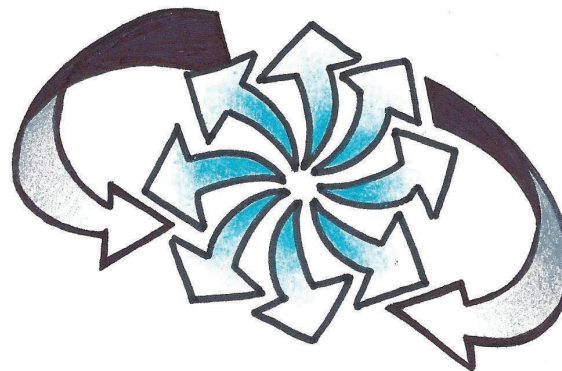
A person with dementia may forget what he or she has said, heard or has done from one moment to the next, leading to repeated questions and actions.

Usually doing things over and over is not harmful in itself to the person with dementia, if the carer knows how to deal with it.

If not, the person with dementia can become anxious, aggressive or depressed and the carer can become stressed.

As a result, carers may respond inappropriately, for example by yelling, which often makes them feel guilty.

- Does the person you care for ever do or say things over and over again?
- What does the person you care for repeat?



Say things over and over again

Let's look at this example.

John is taking care of his father, Joe, because his mother, the main carer, is out of the house for a few hours. All seems fine, although John notices that his father is rather tense because John's mother is not there.

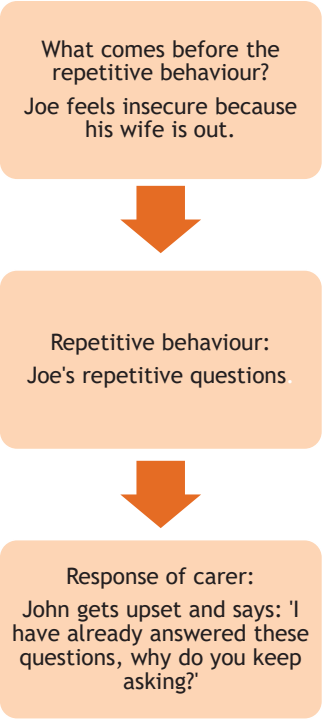
John and Joe eat lunch together. Sometime after finishing lunch, Joe asks: 'When is lunch?' and 'What are we having for lunch?' John does not think much of it at first.

Then, again, a few minutes later, Joe asks 'When is lunch?', 'What are we having for lunch?', and 'Where is your mother?'.

Joe repeats these questions again and again. John is confused about why he is doing this and gets more and more worried about his father.

John continues to answer the questions but becomes a bit frustrated and raises his voice. John responds loudly, 'I have already answered these questions, why do you keep asking?'

Take a look at the boxes at the right.



Check your understanding

*What would you recommend?*

What would you recommend to John?

Click on any responses you think are appropriate.

- ☐ Say: 'What's wrong with you? Can't you remember? We just had lunch!'
- ☐ Stay calm and reassure his father that his wife will be home soon.
- ☐ Engage his father with an activity.

- ☐ Write down the answers to his questions, for example where his wife is and when she is expected to return.
- ☐ Walk away.
- ☐ Accept the repetitive questions. If it isn't harmful, let it be. Find ways to adapt.
- ☐ Offer father a snack or a drink.



ANSWERS - How to respond to repetitive behaviours

Check your understanding



Let's look at your answer

✗ Say: 'What's wrong with you?

Can't you remember? We just had lunch!'

This is not a good response because John is blaming his father for something he can't help.

✓ Stay calm and reassure his father that his wife will be home soon.

This is a good response because repetition might worsen due to Joe's feelings of insecurity. He seems to feel insecure because his wife went out. By reassuring Joe that his wife will come back soon, the repetition may lessen or stop.

✓ Engage his father with an activity.

This can be a good response because it may distract his father and offer something else to see, hear or do.

✓ Write down the answers to his questions, for example where his wife is and when she is expected to return.

This might work well and may reassure Joe and stop him from asking again.

✗ Walk away.

This response is not so good because it will only upset his father more.

✓ Accept the repetitive questions. If it isn't harmful, let it be. Find ways to adapt.

Perhaps if it is just repetitive questioning, by remaining calm the behaviour may decrease.

✓ Offer father a snack or a drink.

This might be a good response. Perhaps Joe is still hungry or thirsty. It may help to calm him and meet his need.

Activity



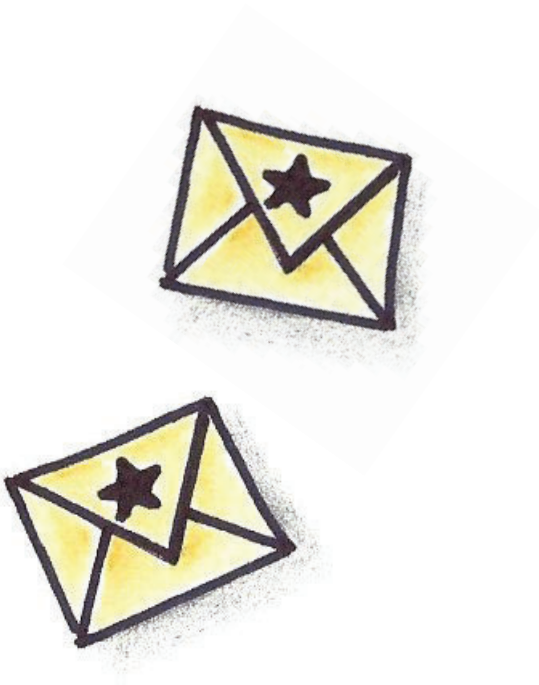
Let's look at your own situation

It is important to relate what you have learnt to your own situation.
These boxes are for you, like a diary.

Has the person with dementia been repeating things lately?

What could you do to help reduce this?

What could you do to change your response to this?



Keep in Mind



Let's review what you have learned

- Doing or saying things over and over again (repetitive behaviour) is common in people with dementia.
- Repetition can be very stressful to deal with.
- In case of repetition, try to increase comforting the person you care for.
- Try to identify what comes before that may increase this and try to change it; try to identify how you respond and change that also.
- Realise there are good days and some bad days.
- Remind yourself that repetitive behaviour is part of the disease.
- Use memory aids (write notes, make signs, use large clocks and calendars) to help orient the person.
- Take a deep breath and think about the best ways to respond that will be least distressing for you and the person you care for in case they do or say things over and over again.

Additional resources

Dementia Australia, <https://www.dementia.org.au/>

The National Dementia Helpline 1800 100 500 is open nationally from 9.00am to 5.00pm Monday to Friday excluding public holidays. A message service is available if you call outside operating hours.

My Aged Care <https://www.myagedcare.gov.au>

Carer support groups can sometimes be organised around specific caring roles and the situation of the person you care for. For information about these groups in your area visit the website or, call My Aged Care on 1800 200 422.

RELATED LEARNING UNITS

- Module 2 Unit 1 The journey together
- Module 3 Unit 1 Reducing stress in everyday life
- Module 5 Unit 6 Walking and getting lost



You finished this unit, well done!