

Caring for people with emotions & behaviors due to dementia

Art Walaszek, M.D.

April 21, 2023



School of Medicine
and Public Health

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Wisconsin Alzheimer's
Disease Research Center

Wisconsin Alzheimer's
Institute

Emotions & behaviors in people with dementia

About 90% of people with dementia will have behavioral & psychological symptoms of dementia (BPSD) sometime over the course of their illness.

BPSD can be distressing to patients and caregivers, can affect patients' ability to live independently, and can be dangerous.

How common are BPSD*?

49% 
apathy

42 
depression

40 
aggression

39 
sleep disorder

39 
anxiety

34 
appetite disorder

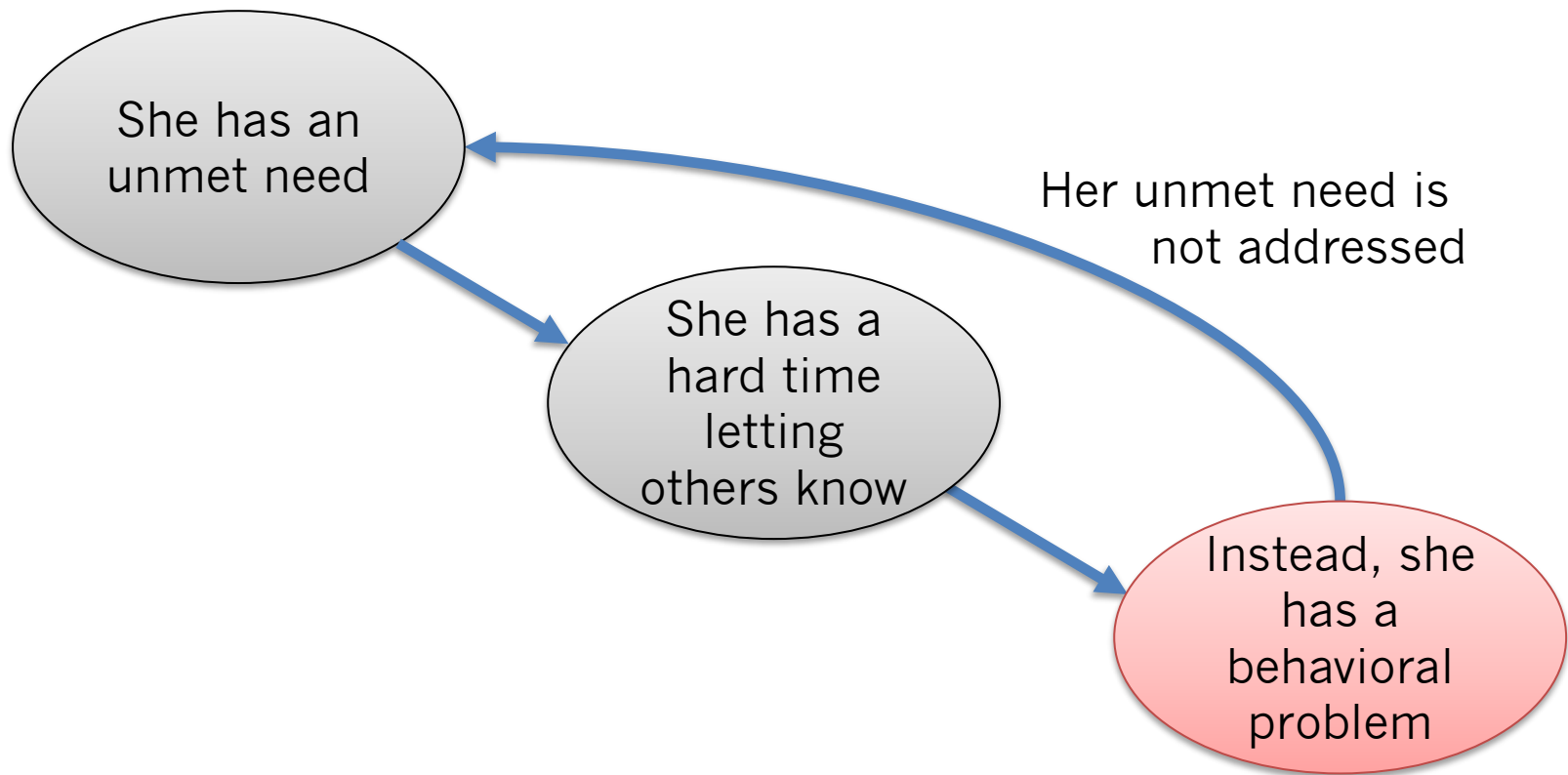
32 
aberrant motor behavior

31 
delusions

17 
disinhibition

16 
hallucinations

Why do BPSD* occur?



Talking with a person living with dementia (1)

- Don't try to reason or convince.
- Keep your questions, responses and instructions simple. Break down instructions into one or two steps at a time.
- Avoid open-ended questions. Instead, offer two choices – and you may have to help them with the choice.
- Speak more slowly. Speak in simple and direct language.

Talking with a person living with dementia (2)

- Consider using gestures, pictures, written words or verbal cues.
- Give the person enough time and opportunity to express themselves.
- Avoid negative words, tone, and facial expressions. Don't ask the person to "try harder." Don't tell them that they are wrong.
- Use calm, positive statements. Be reassuring and encouraging. Celebrate small successes. Express your gratitude.

Improving the daily life of a person living with dementia

- Get light during the day, especially in the morning.
- Get regular exercise – even 10 minutes walking per day can be a good start.
- Try to stick to a schedule: same time each day to get up, take meds, eat meals, and go to bed.
- Try activities that the person will find fun, interesting, and doable.
- Make sure they have enough food and drink and some room to safely roam.

Talking with healthcare professionals

- **Describe what's going on**
 - “I’m worried that Mom has dementia. Her memory is much worse than it used to be. She’s forgetting to take her medications. Her blood pressure is higher. She’s fallen a few times and hit her head.”
- **Express your concern**
 - “I’m worried that she may hurt herself accidentally because she’s having a hard time taking care of herself.”
- **Assert what you think is needed**
 - “Could we schedule an appointment with you so that you can examine Mom and order tests?”
- **Reinforce a positive outcome**
 - “Thank you for taking my concerns seriously.”

How we assess BPSD*

- What are the specific symptoms?
- When do the symptoms happen?
- How often?
- How long do they last?
- How severe?
- How do caregivers respond?
- What happens afterward?
- What medications is the person taking, including over-the-counter?
- Any alcohol or other drugs?
- Could there be a medical cause?
 - infection
 - electrolytes
 - dehydration
 - constipation
 - pain
 - head injury

How we manage BPSD*

- treat underlying medical causes
- stop medications & substances that could be problems
- support caregivers & other family members
- create a plan to address behaviors
- make sure everyone's in a safe place
- don't add new medications, unless there is risk of harm to patient or others (or a lot of distress)
- if a medication is added, monitor carefully

Cautions when using medications

- **Polypharmacy:** people with dementia already take a lot of medications. New medications could interact with current ones.
- Medications for BPSD* don't work all that well.
- Medications for BPSD can have a lot of side effects. These could include falls, sleepiness, confusion and even death.
- We have to carefully weigh the risks and benefits of these medications.
- Please don't stop a medication without checking with a healthcare professional first.

Questions to ask about medications

- What will this medication help with?
- What are the most likely side effects? What are the most serious side effects?
- How long will the medication take to work?
- How long will the person have to take the medication?
- What if we don't start a medication? What are the other choices?

How you can learn more

- Wisconsin Alzheimer's Institute
- Aging & Disability Resource Center
 - Dementia care specialists in Milwaukee County: Candice LeGros and Cristina Huitron
- Alzheimer's Association



Stephanie Houston

Summary

We can improve the lives of people living with dementia and their caregivers.

Thank you. Questions?



awalaszek@wisc.edu