

Australian version

iSupport For Dementia

Training and support manual
for carers of people with dementia



Unit 6. Walking and getting lost

Why is this unit important?

Concerns about walking and getting lost can cause distress. Walking may lead the person with dementia outdoors, which can expose them to dangers such as traffic or dangerous weather conditions. Walking may occur on foot, by car or public transportation.

How will this unit help me?

This learning unit will help you to understand the reasons for getting lost and what to do to reduce the chances of the person becoming lost.

What will I learn?

- Walking around or wandering away is common in people with dementia.
- Possible reasons why someone with dementia may wander.
- Practical tips to reduce the chances that someone gets lost and to manage wandering habits.



Why is wandering a concern?

People with dementia may have the habit of wandering around the home or leave the house and want to walk around the neighbourhood. They may get lost, so safety is a primary concern when people with dementia are out alone.

It is important to prevent wandering

This learning unit will help you understand the possible reasons people desire to wander and steps you can take to help make it safer.

It is important to find ways to help prevent people with dementia from getting lost or ending up in an unsafe situation.

Activity



Does the person you care for sometimes walk around or wander away?

Can you describe what happens?

Possible reasons for wandering

- Wanting to exercise
- Continuing a lifelong habit of walking regularly
- Relieving boredom due to lack of stimulation
- Using up energy from sitting all day
- Relieving pain and discomfort from joint pain or stiffness or in need of the toilet
- Responding to stress, anxiety, delusions or hallucinations
- Feeling lost or uncertain about their surroundings
- Going out and forgetting where they were going
- Searching for someone or something in the past or present
- Seeking fulfilment and purpose such as the desire to go to work
- Getting confused about the time
- Agitation from over-stimulation
- Confusion relating to a new environment.

Let’s look at an example

Aron has dementia and is supported by his wife, Sandra. Sandra is cooking dinner when she hears Aron heading for the door. She knows he likes to go for afternoon walks, but now is not a good time since she is cooking.

Check your understanding



What should Sandra do?

Choose from the following options:

- ☐ Yell to Aron from the kitchen: 'Please stop! I can't come with you now.'
- ☐ Turn the oven off and follow Aron.
- ☐ Go to where Aron is standing by the door and calmly say: 'Let's eat dinner first and we'll go for a walk later.'
- ☐ Forbid Aron from leaving and pull him back into the house.
- ☐ Lock the door so Aron cannot leave.
- ☐ Let Aron leave and call a neighbour to keep an eye out for him.
- ☐ Ask another family member to go for a walk with him.
- ☐ Schedule more afternoon walks before dinner.
- ☐ Ask Aron to help with a job in the kitchen.
- ☐ Keep a log or record when Aron wants to go for a walk.

Check your understanding



What should Sandra do?

✗ **Yell to Aron from the kitchen: 'Please stop! I can't come with you now.'**

This is not a good response because yelling at Aron from the kitchen may confuse and agitate him. It may also not stop him from going out on his own.

✓ **Turn the oven off and follow Aron.**

This is a good response only if there are no other alternatives.

✓ **Go to where Aron is standing by the door and calmly say: 'Let's eat dinner first and we'll go for a walk later.'**

This is a good response because Sandra stays calm, does not yell and respects Aron's wishes by telling him they will go together after dinner.

✗ **Forbid Aron from leaving and pull him back into the house.**

This is not a good response because Aron may get agitated and resist being pulled which could result in Aron or Sandra being harmed.

✓ **Lock the door so Aron cannot leave.**

Consider this response only if no other options exist and someone is in the house with Aron. For fire and other safety reasons, a person with dementia who requires supervision should never be locked inside a house without another person there.

✓ **Let Aron leave and call a neighbour to keep an eye out for him.**

This may be an option only if Sandra has prearranged with the neighbours to keep an eye out for him. If Aron is in the very early stages of dementia, he may be okay while going out on his own to places that are familiar to him.

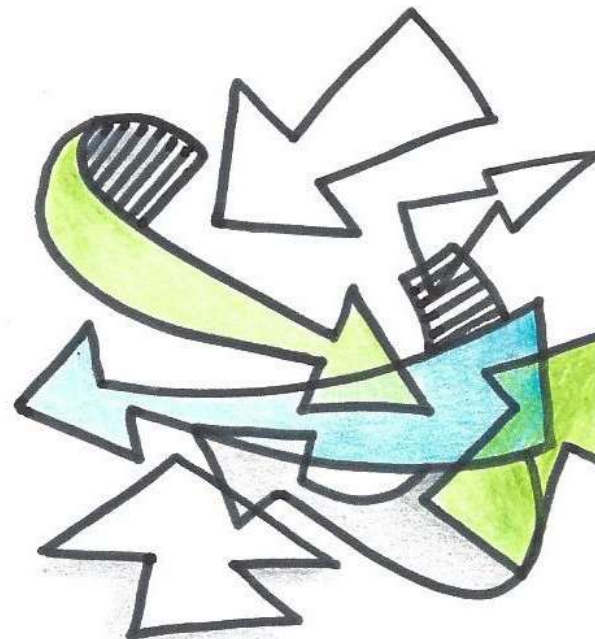
✓ **Ask another family member to go for a walk with him.**

This is a good option. Sandra can finish cooking dinner and Aron can enjoy a nice walk before dinner.

Check your understanding (Continued)

*What should Sandra do?*

- ✓ **Schedule more afternoon walks before dinner.**
This is a good response because planning ahead will prevent Sandra from having to interrupt cooking dinner to assist Aron. Exercise can help the person use up extra energy and may improve the person's sleep patterns.
- ✓ **Ask Aron to help with a job in the kitchen.**
This is a good response because it involves distracting Aron from going for a walk alone and gives him purpose and activity.
- ✓ **Keep a log or record when Aron wants to go for a walk.**
This is a good response as it can help provide insight into reasons for the person's wandering behaviour. Understanding the person's wandering patterns and triggers can help you put strategies in place.



Things that may help

Here is a list of things that may help to manage a person's wandering habits and prevent the person from getting lost:

- Keep to the routines and activities of the person you care for. Identify the most likely times of the day that the person you care for wandering may occur and plan activities such as a walk together at that time.
- Reassure the person you care for if the person feels lost, abandoned or disoriented, or wants to leave to 'go home' or 'go to work'. For example: 'We are staying here tonight. We are safe and I'll be with you. We can walk in the morning after a good night's rest.' Try to refrain from correcting the person with dementia.
- Ensure all basic needs have been met. Has the person gone to the toilet? Is he or she thirsty or hungry?
- Avoid going out to busy places that are confusing and can cause disorientation, such as shopping malls, markets, or other places when they are busy.
- Make sure the person carries some form of identification. Consider the use of a medical alert bracelet.
- Make sure your home is secure and that the person is safe in your home and cannot leave without you knowing. For example, camouflaging doors and door knobs may help or using a bell or curtain that makes noise when someone uses the door.
- When the person is found, speak calmly with acceptance and love, try to avoid blaming and showing anger. Reassure the person about where they are.
- Remember that neither you nor the person is to blame.
- It is helpful to keep an up-to-date photograph in case the person gets lost and you must ask for help from others.

Activity



Let's look at your own situation

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

1. What are the possible reasons listed in this learning unit that the person you care for may have the desire to walk?

- ☐ Wanting to exercise
- ☐ Continuing a lifelong habit of walking regularly
- ☐ Relieving boredom due to lack of stimulation
- ☐ Using up energy from sitting all day
- ☐ Relieving pain and discomfort from joint pain or stiffness
- ☐ Responding to stress, anxiety, delusions or hallucinations
- ☐ Feeling lost or uncertain about their surroundings
- ☐ Going out and forgetting where they were going
- ☐ Searching for someone or something in the past or present
- ☐ Seeking fulfilment and purpose such as the desire to go to work
- ☐ Getting confused about the time.

2. These boxes are for you like a diary:

Based on the reasons you checked, how might you react or respond the next time the person you care for wants to go outside or wanders?

What could you do to help the person enjoy walking in a safe way?

Take a moment to summarise what you have learnt in this learning unit that will help you.

Let's review what you have learned

- Walking around or wandering away is common.
- Walking can be healthy exercise, reduce boredom, and be a common habit or routine of the person.
- Walking away or walking alone may be a safety risk.
- Concerns about wandering and getting lost can be very upsetting for the person with dementia and the carer.
- It is important to identify possible reasons for wandering.
- How you respond to the wandering should be based on the possible reasons.
- If one approach doesn't work, try another one.
- Realise there will be good and bad days.
- Remember that neither you nor the person is to blame.
- Take a deep breath and think about the best ways to respond that will be the least distressing for you and the person you care for.

Additional Resources

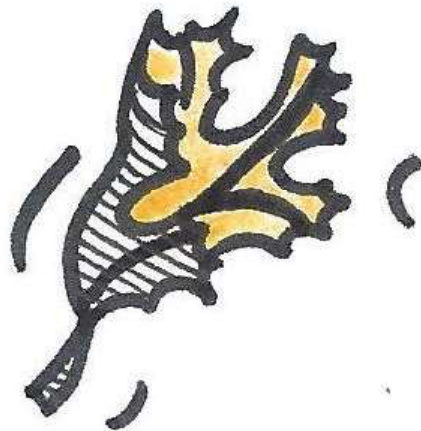
- **Dementia Australia**, <https://www.dementia.org.au/>
The National Dementia Helpline 1800 100 500 is open nationally from 9.00am to 5.00pm Monday to Friday excluding public holidays. A message service is available if you call outside operating hours.
- **Dementia Support Australia** <https://www.dementia.com.au/>
The Dementia Behaviour Management Advisory Service (DBMAS) offers people with dementia and their carers support in managing behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia, such as wandering and aggression. Contact them on 1800 699 799 (24 hours a day).
- **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 2 Improving communication
- Module 4 Unit 3 Toileting and continence care
- Module 5 Unit 7 Changes in judgment

You finished this learning unit, well done!

Would you like to try the following relaxation exercise?



Meditation

This exercise will help you feel calm and reduces stress. You will breathe with your stomach according to a rhythm.

This is how you do it:

- Sit straight on a chair and make sure your face and shoulders are relaxed.
- Bring your hands to your stomach and breathe into your belly.
- Breathe in for 4 counts and breathe out for 8 counts at a comfortable pace.
- Your stomach should expand with each inhale, and it contracts with each exhale.
- Return to your normal breathing and spend one minute just watching your breath and noticing how you feel.
- Practice listening without negative judgement.
- If your mind wanders, refocus on breathing and meditation.



You finished this unit, well done!