

Why does puzzling behaviour occur?

I often hear staff say, “It just happens for no reason...” when they cannot find an observable trigger for behaviour or if they are frustrated by not being able to understand the behaviour.

All behaviour occurs for a reason. It may be triggered by something in the environment such as another person entering a room or seeing themselves in a mirror.

Or it may be triggered by something internal to the person such as an emotion, a memory, a thought, pain, infection or constipation. And these are the triggers/reasons we often miss.

It is important to remember that thinking is often confused and disorganised in dementia. So thoughts that occur to the person may have no basis in external reality. This may result in a seemingly senseless action from the person.

For example, the agitation that can occur in the afternoon, known as “Sundowning”, occurs because of the time of day, tiredness and the person’s brain continuing to try to interpret and function in the external world with depleted resources which causes a very understandable stress reaction, i.e., restlessness, tearfulness, pacing, talking and insecurity etc. Much as we all do when we become stressed. It’s no different.

There is always a reason. It may not be obvious. It may not be in the environment but within the person. Patient observation, knowledge of the individual person and empathy for their feelings and perspective are the essentials of good dementia care.