

# From Day to Dusk: Strategies to Cope with Sundowning

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In people with **Alzheimer's or dementia**, sundowning is a behavioural shift that commonly happens during the transition from day to dusk. It is marked by confusion, irritability, restlessness and repetitive behaviour.

The causes of sundowning are not clear, but is believed to be due to changes in the brain that affect the 'biological clock'. This leads to confused sleep-awake cycles.

COMMON BEHAVIOURS	TRIGGERS & CAUSES	STRATEGY
 <p><b>Agitation</b> <b>Heightened irritability</b> Being quick to anger</p> <p><b>Yelling</b> Emotional Distress</p>	<p><b>Fatigue</b> Physical pain or discomfort</p> <p>Over-stimulation</p>  <p><b>Disruptions to routine</b> Medicine side effects</p> <p><b>Changes in the brain due to the disease</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Set up a daily routine with regular times for meals, sleep and other daily activities</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Plan light exercise and activities during the day, ideally in the mornings and early afternoons</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Speak slowly and clearly</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Buffer in time to process changes</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reduce clutter, unnecessary/unfamiliar noise</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Avoid reasoning/arguing and raised voices. Instead of reacting, listen and try to uncover the emotion or cause behind the agitation</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reassure the person and distract them from stressful or upsetting events</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Manage pain appropriately</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Repetitive behaviours:</b> opening and closing doors, touching things or moving their hands</p> <p><b>Asking questions over and over again</b></p> <p><b>Pacing or wandering</b></p>	<p><b>Memory loss</b></p> <p><b>Anxiety about abandonment and separation</b></p> <p><b>Unfamiliar environments</b></p>  <p><b>Boredom</b></p> <p>Physical needs such as hunger or toileting that they cannot express</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Remain patient and calm and speak slowly and clearly</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Use appropriate physical touch to reassure them</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Re-direct their energies to another activity such as a walk, music or a familiar or enjoyable task</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Engage them in another topic of conversation</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Use large clocks and calendars to remind them of the time and day</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If the repetitive action is not harmful, allow them to continue</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Difficulty going to sleep at night</b></p>	<p><b>Cognitive decline</b> can affect sleep cycles</p>  <p><b>Lack of physical activity and mental stimulation during the day</b></p> <p>Hunger, thirst or physical discomfort</p> <p><b>Unfamiliar environment</b></p> <p><b>Over-stimulation</b> late in the day</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Establish a regular and relaxing sleep routine</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Integrate daily activity and exercise</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Avoid naps, too much time in bed and caffeine</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Ensure that they are comfortable, clean and fed before bed</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Create a conducive sleep environment</li> </ul>

Light therapy is believed to be helpful to counteract these behaviours as well. Getting enough sunlight early in the day may help lower the sense of disorientation.