

Paranoia

Imagine how frightening and exhausting life would be if paranoia were a daily fact of life. For many residents, that's exactly how it is — and they are powerless to change it.

People who experience paranoia, or anxiety, deal every day with fear, panic attacks, obsessions, confusion, irritability, restlessness, anger and more. Not a nice way to live, as staff and families can testify.

What contributes to these unhappy behaviours, and how can family and friends help?

Causes

- o A habit of worrying can, if unchecked, take over a person's life and view of the world; worriers often forget to think about solutions.
- o Poor nutrition, beverages with caffeine and not enough liquids.
- o Psychiatric disorders, such as depression, schizophrenia.
- o Brain damage or memory loss (from dementias like Alzheimer's disease).
- o Toxic conditions; for example, reactions to medications, alcoholism.
- o Medical problems, including fever, pain, infections, heart disease, thyroid and blood sugar disorders.
- o Reduced hearing or sight.
- o A blow to the head.
- o Environmental changes: a new place to live, new people, disruption to routines, too much going on.

Residents usually can't help their paranoid or anxious behaviour, and nothing staff or families can do will ever make it stop completely. How, then, should families cope? First of all, by mentally removing your shoes and stepping into those worn by the resident . . . then trying some of the following ideas.

How You Can Help

- o Promise yourself never to take accusations personally. You are not the real victim here; the resident is. Maintain a calm, caring manner.
- o Reassure — endlessly, if necessary. A “reality check” by a familiar, trusted family member or friend goes a long way toward soothing a victim of paranoia or anxiety. For example, tell the resident that the nightly visitor who frightens him so much is in fact his nurse who is quietly checking to make sure he's okay (then tell caregivers what you learned about the resident's fears — staff can help, too).
- o Don't argue, challenge or contradict. Instead, try to redirect the conversation.
- o Remind the resident where valuables are kept. Help to look for missing items (and once you find the favourite hiding place, let caregivers know). Never scold for losing or hiding items.
- o Residents who are anxious may not remember, so repeat important information about visits, care plans, etc.
- o If you are there during a particularly anxious moment, move to a small, quiet room and try to distract the resident: encourage slow, deep breathing; teach skills like mental visualization where you ask the resident to imagine herself in a warm, comforting situation; engage the resident in a familiar activity like listening to music, exercise, cards, looking at a photo album, rolling coins, drawing. Routines are calming and familiar, and build a sense of security.
- o Sometimes touch — if the resident will accept it — is more soothing than words; ask if you can tuck her hand in yours.

If you have any questions about paranoia or anxiety, please talk to the director of care.