

# Words that hurt, actions that help: Navigating responsive behaviours in dementia care

## Definitions

Responsive behaviours are actions, words, or gestures that may seem aggressive or inappropriate but are often expressions of unmet needs, fear, or distress. Examples are yelling, swearing, insults, hitting, grabbing, throwing objects, or refusing care.

## Instructions

Start the huddle by reviewing the definition of responsive behaviours. Then read the scenario aloud and use the guiding questions to have a discussion.

## Learning Outcomes

After this huddle, staff should be able to:

- Describe what responsive behaviour is and how it can include verbal abuse.
- Discuss what they might feel if experiencing verbal abuse.
- Identify and list strategies to self-settle after an incident.
- Identify when to seek help if they feel unsafe.



## Notes to the huddle leader

- This can be a sensitive subject. Ensure the group is open and understanding.
- Reinforce that staff should do a point of care risk assessment before starting any task, to establish if it is safe to proceed.
- Do you have a violence prevention policy? When was it last updated? Are staff trained to apply it?
- Let staff know they can talk to you privately about guiding question five, if necessary.

## Scenario

Mr. Reed has moderate dementia and has recently been showing signs of increased agitation in the mornings, especially during care routines. One morning, as you approach, he throws his toothbrush towards you and yells: “Get out of here. You’re completely useless. I don’t want you touching me!”

## Guiding questions

1. What might have triggered Mr. Reed’s behaviour?
2. What feelings could staff experience when being talked to this way? Are these feelings valid?
3. What self-settling strategies have worked well for you?
4. If you feel unsafe, physically or psychologically, what steps should you take? What support is available to you, and how can you initiate a refusal of unsafe work, if needed?
5. Are there specific challenges on this topic you would like support with?

## Important takeaways for staff

- While verbal abuse can be a form of responsive behaviour, especially in individuals with dementia or cognitive challenges, it’s still important to recognize its impact and take steps to protect your psychological safety.
- Responsive behaviours can sometimes be prevented by understanding needs and adjusting care approaches. However, even if everything seems to go well, responsive

behaviours can still occur.

- Your feelings are valid—don’t hesitate to seek support.
- Your safety matters—use de-escalation techniques, report incidents, and know how to initiate a refusal of unsafe work.



Safety Huddle | Naviga

Huddle leader: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Attendance:

Name:

Initial

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## Additional resources

Card | *Point of care*  
*assessment care* [SafeCare BC]

Course | *Provincial Violence Prevention Curriculum*  
[SafeCare BC]

Guide | *Wellness and support guide* [SafeCare BC]

Pocketbook | *Home care and community health support*  
pocketbook [SafeCare BC]

Poster | *Point of care risk assessment- Violence prevention* [SafeCare BC]

Program | *Care for Caregivers*  
[SafeCare BC and Canadian  
Mental Health Association]

Safety huddle | *De-escalation strategies* [SafeCare BC]

Safety huddle | *Understanding behaviours related to dementia* [SafeCare BC]

Safety huddle | *Point-of-care assessment for violence*  
[SafeCare BC]

Worksheet | *Point-of-care risk assessment* [SafeCare BC]

## Notes

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**SafeCare BC**