



# Managing Sundowning and Late-Day Agitation in Dementia

## A caregiver guide to understanding and managing late-day confusion in dementia

### What is Sundowning?

Sundowning is a pattern of increased confusion, anxiety, agitation, and restlessness that can begin or worsen in the late afternoon and evening. It's not a disease itself, but a common group of symptoms related to dementia. It is estimated to affect up to 66% of individuals living with Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementias at some point. During sundowning, the person's memory and thinking become more impaired toward evening, leading to notable changes in mood and behavior. These behaviors often peak during the mid-to-late stages of dementia and can be very distressing for both the individual and their caregiver.

### Common Signs to Watch For:

- **Increased Confusion:** Trouble with tasks that were easier earlier in the day or difficulty recognizing familiar people and places.
- **Anxiety and Irritability:** Becoming easily upset, fearful, suspicious, or sad.
- **Restlessness and Agitation:** Pacing, wandering, or shouting.
- **Wanting to "Go Home":** Insisting they need to leave to go home or fulfill a past responsibility, even when they are already in their own home.

### Why Does It Happen?

While the exact causes are not fully understood, sundowning is not intentional behavior. It is an expression of distress from a brain struggling to process its surroundings. Key factors include:

- **A Disrupted "Body Clock":** Dementia can damage the part of the brain that controls our 24-hour sleep-wake cycle, leading to a deep confusion between day and night.
- **End-of-Day Fatigue:** Mental and physical exhaustion from the day's activities can lower a person's ability to cope with stress.

- **Low Light and Shadows:** As daylight fades, shadows can become frightening or confusing, causing the person to misinterpret what they see.
- **Unmet Needs:** The person may be unable to communicate that they are in pain, hungry, thirsty, or need to use the toilet.
- **Overstimulation or Boredom:** Too much noise and activity from a TV or visitors, or conversely, a lack of engaging activity, can both lead to agitation.
- **Routine changes or stress:** A change/upset in the normal daily routine can increase late-day confusion

Sundowning isn't anyone's fault. It results from changes in the brain combined with day-to-day factors like those above. By understanding what might be contributing (for example, a skipped meal), you can take steps to prevent or ease these behaviors.

### What Caregivers Can Do

Proactive strategies that create a calm, predictable environment are often the most effective.

- **Stick to a Predictable Routine:** Consistent times for waking up, meals, and going to bed help regulate the body's internal clock and reduce anxiety.<sup>1</sup>
- **Manage Light Exposure:**
  - **During the day,** maximize exposure to bright, natural light. Open blinds or spend time near a window. Exposure to sunlight during the day can help reset the body's internal clock and improve nighttime sleep
  - **In the evening,** *before* dusk arrives, close the curtains to reduce shadows and turn on plenty of warm, indoor lights to create a bright and reassuring environment.
- **Plan the Day Wisely:**
  - Schedule more demanding or stressful activities—like doctor's appointments or bathing—for the morning, when the person is typically most resilient.
  - Avoid over-scheduling the day. A packed agenda, even with pleasant activities, can lead to exhaustion.
  - Keep daytime naps short and not too late in the day, as this can interfere with nighttime sleep.
- **Use Calming Activities in the Late Afternoon:** Create a quiet transition into the evening by engaging the person in simple, soothing activities. Try:
  - Playing soft, familiar music from their youth.
  - Doing simple, repetitive tasks like folding laundry or looking through old photo albums.
  - Watching a favorite, gentle television show that is familiar and not emotionally upsetting (avoid the news or dramatic programs).
- **Limit Stimulants:** Avoid caffeine, sugar, and large meals in the evening. Alcohol should also be avoided as it can increase confusion and anxiety.

- **Try Gentle Reassurance, Not Correction:** Arguing or trying to reason with someone who is confused will likely increase their distress. Instead, respond to the emotion behind their words.
  - **Validate their feeling:** "I can see you're feeling worried."
  - **Reassure them:** "You are safe here with me."
  - **Gently redirect their attention:** "I know you want to go, but how about we have a cup of tea first?"
- **Monitor for Discomfort:** Be a detective. Regularly and proactively check for non-verbal signs of pain (like grimacing), offer a drink or a light snack, and maintain a regular toileting schedule to prevent discomfort.

Every person with dementia is different, so it may take trial and error to find what works best. In general, practical strategies that calm and comfort the person during late afternoon/evening can make a big difference.

Keep notes of what helps or triggers your loved one's agitation. Over time, you may identify patterns – for instance, you might notice sundowning is worse on days that are very busy, suggesting a need for more rest, or vice versa. Adjust routines gradually based on what you learn about the person's unique needs and preferences.

## When to Seek Help

While sundowning is common, some situations require a doctor's attention to rule out other treatable medical issues. Contact a doctor if you notice:

- **A sudden and severe change in behavior:** An abrupt onset or worsening of sundowning symptoms could be a sign of an underlying infection (like a urinary tract infection) or another acute medical problem called delirium.
- **Signs of unmanaged pain:** Agitation, restlessness, or grimacing can be a person's only way of communicating that they are in pain.
- **Behaviors that risk harm:** If aggression puts the person, the caregiver, or others in the home at risk of being harmed, it is essential to seek professional help immediately.
- **Caregiver burnout:** Pay attention to your own wellbeing. Managing sundowning every night can be exhausting. It's okay to ask for help if you feel burned out, highly stressed, or unable to cope. Talk to your doctor, reach out to your local Alzheimer Society chapter, or connect with a dementia care professional about resources. They may suggest respite care services, support groups, or practical guidance to give you relief and support.

## Final Tips and Reassurance

- **You are not alone.** Sundowning is a common and difficult challenge. Feeling

frustrated, tired, or overwhelmed is a normal and valid response to a demanding situation.

- **Take care of yourself.** A caregiver's well-being is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Your own stress and fatigue can affect your loved one. It is not selfish to take breaks—it's essential for you both.
  - Ask family and friends for help or look into formal support like respite care services.
  - Connect with others who understand. A caregiver support group can be a source of great comfort and practical tips. The Alzheimer Society is a great place to start.
- **There is hope.** While there is no cure for dementia, making small, consistent changes to routines and the environment can significantly reduce distress and lead to more peaceful evenings for both you and the person you care for.

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*This brochure is part of ClarityPath's commitment to supporting caregivers with compassionate, evidence-informed resources.*

Visit <https://claritypath.ca/> for more tools and guides.

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## References

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