



# Navigating Through Challenging Behaviors

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### Individual Exercise

See what you know and think about challenging behaviors before starting the class.

Circle “True” or “False” for each of the statements below.

- True False 1. There is very little you can do to prevent most clients’ challenging behaviors.
- True False 2. It takes discipline and hard work to respond and not react to a client’s challenging behavior.
- True False 3. It is your responsibility to control how a client acts.
- True False 4. It is rare that something triggered a client’s challenging behavior.
- True False 5. What you do can sometimes make a challenging behavior worse, not better.
- True False 6. The more you know a client, the better you will be at working with any challenging behaviors.
- True False 7. Look for any health reason for a client’s challenging behavior first.
- True False 8. Never walk away from a client during a challenging situation.
- True False 9. Asking other care team members for help with a challenging situation means YOU have not done your job.
- True False 10. If your first attempt at handling a challenging behavior doesn’t work, try something different.



## Introduction

As a long term care worker, there will be times when working with a client requires more effort, skill, and patience on your part because of a client's challenging behavior. The training provides information, tips, and best practices to help guide you through these challenging situations.

Many clients are under a great deal of stress. Clients can be:

- Facing the loss of their independence, dignity, purpose, home, favorite possessions, pets, or friends and family either through death or distance.
- Losing control of parts of their body.
- Living with chronic pain.
- Experiencing many difficult emotions such as fear, hopelessness, anxiety, frustration, uncertainty, or even depression.
- Have a disease or be on medication(s) with side effects that create challenging behavior.

It is unrealistic to think a client can handle this much stress and change gracefully all the time. It takes **a lot of hard work and courage** not to be crabby, bad-tempered, withdrawn, anxious, resentful, angry, and/or impatient at least sometimes.

It is up to a client to control his or her behavior (to the degree possible based on his or her disease or situation). How a client behaves is not your responsibility. But, many times there are things you and other members of the client's care team CAN do to help prevent or minimize a client's slide into negative or challenging behaviors.

You will need additional information outside of what is covered in this training to handle challenging behaviors when the client's disease or condition impacts behavior. Always talk to the appropriate person where you work if you need more information, support, or resources.

**Many clients are role models for handling significant life change with dignity and grace.**

## When Behavior Becomes Challenging

This training focuses on what happens when a client's behaviors moves from negativity to challenging, threatening, or even dangerous. This may be:

- **Verbally** – such as yelling, name calling, blaming, swearing, or sexual advances.
- **Physically** – such as hitting, biting, kicking, grabbing, throwing things, pinching, or spitting.

As a LTC worker, your role is to use a conscious, logical approach to help calm and resolve the situation respectfully and safely. You want to:

- Get to know what triggers a client's challenging behavior. Learn what:
  - Helps prevent it from happening in the first place.
  - Things help stop or minimize the behavior when it happens.
- Remain calm and respond, not react, to the situation.
- Make sure your behavior does not create or intensify the situation.
- Know when YOU need help and should get others involved.
- Keep other care team members updated (documenting and reporting).
- Get medical or other emergency help when it is needed.



## Steps to Navigating Challenging Behaviors

There are three main steps that will help you navigate through a challenging behavior.

- 1. Stop.**
  - Make sure you are not reacting.
  - Get calm and focused.
- 2. Try to figure out what triggered the behavior.**
- 3. Consciously choose** how best to move forward.
  - Problems solve possible actions to take.
  - Try what you think is the best solution.
  - Adapt what you are doing or try something else if it isn't working.

### Navigating Through Challenging Behaviors Guidelines



#### **1. Make sure you are not reacting.**

Get **calm and focused.**

Look for **what might have triggered** the behavior.

**Rule out any health concerns** first.

#### **2. Think.**

What can you do to help calmly navigate through what is happening?



#### **3. Pick the best solution/action and try it.**

Get help if you need it.

If your solution doesn't work — **try something else.**

The more experiences you have as a LTC worker the more you will find yourself following these steps automatically. As with any new skill, you have to practice it to get more comfortable.

Even with experience, dealing with challenging behaviors is unsettling. You may experience feelings of guilt, anger, frustration or be overwhelmed. After a challenging situation is over, you may second guess every step and wonder if you handled things correctly. These are all normal feelings reported by other LTC workers – and part of the reason these situations are considered a “challenge.” Be patient with yourself. Use these steps as a guide.

**Remember, you are not alone.**

**Rely on other members of the client's care team for advice, information, and support.**





### Individual Exercise:

Briefly describe the most challenging behavior you have experienced with a client? If you are new to caregiving and haven't experienced a challenging situation with a client yet, describe a challenging situation from your own life or another job.

What were some of the emotions you felt when first faced with the situation?

What did you do to get calm so you could focus on handling the situation?



## 1. Pause, get calm and focus

Most challenging behaviors have a cause or trigger. There is a reason for the behavior. A client's challenging behavior is likely **a reaction** to something that set the behavior in motion. Reacting means the client is unconsciously, emotionally, and possibly impulsively behaving without any thought.

### Reactions are emotional actions without thought.

A person who is reacting is often:

#### Unlikely to:

- Be aware of anything besides what he or she is experiencing.
- Listen or be open to another person's perspective.
- Slow down and think through the consequences of his or her actions.
- Be patient or calm.

#### Likely to:

- Be consumed with emotion - making it difficult to control the emotion or think.
- Feel justified in the way he or she is acting.
- Be easily provoked into becoming even more emotional.

Being around someone who is highly reactive/emotional is contagious. It can be hard not to get pulled into his or her energy. If YOU begin to react to the situation, you are:

#### LESS likely to:

- Listen and get the information you need to understand what is actually happening.
- Stay calm.
- Get the situation resolved quickly.



**MORE** likely to rush in and:

- Become emotionally “hooked in” yourself.
- Provoke the client even further.
- Make the situation worse – not better.

### Reacting often makes the situation worse not better

You can't control the client's behavior. You can control your response to it. You need to work hard to **RESPOND** to what is happening and not **REACT** to it.

Responding to a situation helps you:

- Not add more fuel to the client's challenging behavior.
- Look at things more objectively.
- Conserve your own emotional energy.
- Not become defensive, angry, or upset.
- Logically choose the best approach.
- Not make things worse.

You are ready to respond when you(r):

- Breathing is close to normal – not shallow or elevated.
- Are consciously aware that you are thinking – not emotionally reacting.
- Are observing the situation from the outside – not caught in it.
- Have an idea of what to do.

### Responding is action with thought.



#### Individual Exercise

We all have patterns in how we look, feel, and act when we react. Let's take a closer look at yours.

Think back to a situation where you **KNOW** you reacted instead of responding. This can be at home or work. Examples might be a heated fight, a driver cutting you off on the freeway, or a client throwing his lunch at you.

#### Describe what happens when you react:

In your **body** (such as tense shoulders, shallow or rapid breathing, clenched fists).

With your **emotions** (such as anger, fear, withdrawal, freeze/get numb).

In your **head** (such as “I can't stand this,” “Get me out of here”, “what a jerk”)?



## There is power in the pause!

Responding versus reacting to a challenging situation takes self control and discipline. The best way to respond, and not react, is to STOP before taking any action (unless someone is in immediate danger).

When faced with a challenging situation, train yourself to:

- **STOP** - even if it's only a few seconds.
- Take two or three deep, conscious breaths.
- Catch yourself reacting - look for your own, personal clue or "reaction signal."



### Individual Exercise

Look back at your list above of how you look, feel, and behave when you react. Pick one thing that can serve as your personal "reaction signal". Pick something that you do a lot and is pretty easy to spot once you train yourself to look for it.



Write down your ONE thing.

Practice, practice, practice looking for your "reaction signal" when faced with a challenging situation. You want it to become second nature for you to do so.

When you can easily recognize your reaction signal, you can take the steps you need to become calm and decide how to best handle the situation.

## Button pushing

All of us have things, events, people, environments, or types of situations that push our buttons. It is even harder work to respond, stay calm, and not react when your personal buttons are pushed.



### Individual Exercise

Make a list of some of the things, events, people, environments, or types of situations most likely to push your buttons!

Being better aware of your personal buttons will also help you know whether you are the best person to handle a situation or should ask for help.

## Get calm and focused

There are many ways to get calm and focused. Find what works for you.

- Take a few deep breaths (refer to page 202 in your Learner's Guide for more instruction).



- Count to ten.
- Detach yourself from the emotions of what is happening around you.
- Separate the behavior from the person.
- Recognize it is not about you.
- Repeat a positive phrase or affirmation to yourself such as “I am calm and relaxed in every situation” “I remain calm and positive in difficult situations” “I remain calm and in control under stress.”
- Get a clear picture in your mind of armor surrounding and protecting you from harm.
- Imagine a scene, person, or experience that gives you a feeling of calm.

If you are still unable to get yourself calm and focused, give yourself a brief time-out (if possible in your situation) or ask for help. It is better to walk away for a few minutes and collect yourself than to risk reacting and making the situation worse.

## 2. Figure out what is happening

Your excellent detective, active listening, and observation skills are needed to figure out what is happening. What caused or triggered the challenging behavior? Remember, most challenging behavior has a reason.

In working with any client, it is always important to:

- **Get to know the client**
  - Learn about his or her:
    - Routines, preferences, and daily rhythms – especially as they relate to needed care.
    - Life history.
- **Be emotionally available**
  - Show genuine interest and concern.
  - Realize that your own personal feelings of stress, personal worries, and time pressures can add to any emotional tension the client is experiencing.
  - Actively listen to the client.

Both of these things are especially important when handling challenging behaviors.

### Expressing a Need or Desire

There are many reasons a client may not be able to communicate with words what he or she needs or wants. Clients may not be able to:

- Speak.
- Process things quickly enough to explain what is happening or needed in the moment.
- Understand themselves due to their disease or condition.
- Have the strength to get the words out. For example, he or she may be in too much physical and/or emotional pain.

Sometimes, what you may see as a challenging behavior may be **the only way that client can tell you that he or she needs or wants something**. Here are some examples.





- You are trying to transfer Mrs. Johnson from her chair to her wheelchair to take her to dinner. When you try to put on the transfer belt, she slaps your hands and pushes you away. You try again, she pushes harder. It turns out, Mrs. Johnson needed to go to the bathroom. She was concerned about going to dinner and soiling herself.
- Mr. Adams has rheumatoid arthritis in his hips and back. While helping him get his pants on today, he kicked at you when you tried to get his left leg into his pants. It turns out, Mrs. Adams was in more pain than usual today and what you were doing was making his pain worse.

**Always ask yourself: is the client trying to communicate something he or she wants or needs with his or her challenging behavior?**



### Group Exercise

Take a look at both of the examples listed above. What would the LTC worker need to know or do to understand what was happening in these situations? How would the LTC worker find out the information?

## Physical, Environmental, and Emotional Triggers

The following are some common triggers to look for that may be causing the behavior.

There are three main categories of triggers that might cause or worsen a client's challenging behavior. They include:

1. **Physical triggers** such as a symptom of his or her disease or condition, infection, pain, medication side effect, dehydration or reaction to care being given.
2. **Environmental triggers** such as too much noise or people, intrusion into his or her space, temperature (too hot or cold), something unfamiliar being added in the environment, something familiar being removed or moved, or lack of privacy.
3. **Emotional triggers** such as overwhelming feelings because of past or current events or relationships such as the loss of a loved one, loneliness, a fight or disappointment with a relative/friend/another care team member, anxiety, or fear, etc.

The client's perspective is what's important when looking for possible triggers. What has triggered the client's challenging behavior can be very different than what would trigger yours.

**Walk in the client's shoes instead of your own.**



Look for **physical triggers**

**Think about possible physical causes first.** This is especially important if you see a sudden change in a client's behavior. Physical triggers can include:

- Medication side effects or drug interactions. This is especially important when medications are added or stopped.
- Symptoms caused by the disease or condition.



- An infection, such as a urinary tract infection.
- Pain.
- Dehydration.
- Hunger or thirst.
- Fatigue.
- Recent injury.
- Incontinence.
- Constipation.
- Unmet physical care needs such as needing to go to the bathroom.
- Uncomfortable clothing.

Although you need to be familiar with common symptoms of infection, dehydration, the client's disease or condition, and medication side effects, your role as a LTC worker **does not include diagnosing medical issues**. If you are concerned about a client's medical symptoms, always contact the appropriate health care person where you work. Get help!



### Environmental triggers

- Too cold or too hot
- Lights too bright or too dark
- Too many people, noise, things happening
- Someone or something too close to the client's personal space or things
- New environment or people



### Emotional triggers

- Change in routine (especially if the client feels no control over the change)
- Recent big changes or losses in the client's life
- Difficulty with family, friends, other care team members
- Need for attention or to regain a sense of control
- Depression
- Boredom

### Other things to look for

The answers to the following questions can help you pinpoint what is happening.

- What happened just before the behavior started?
- Were there other people involved when the behavior occurred?
- What is happening in the person's living space?
- Is this new behavior?
- Are there certain actions that make it worse?
- Is the client trying to communicate a need or desire?
- Is the client getting attention for the behavior?
- Are there any patterns you can see? For example, is there a certain time of day, events such as shift changes, person, substances like sugar or caffeine, or after taking a certain medication that sets it off?





















## Handling sexual behaviors

- Sexual behaviors may not be personal or even sexual. The behavior could be how the client is expressing something he or she needs. For example, a man pulling down his pants might need to go to the bathroom – and is not “exposing” himself for sexual reasons.
- Redirect the client into another activity or in a neutral, matter-of-fact manner.
- Ask the client to move to a private location.
- Sometimes a client can get confused by your touch. Explain to the client why you are there in a matter-of-fact tone and move on.
- A client may be involved in a consenting sexual relationship. There may be policies and procedures where you work on how you are to handle these types of situations. Make sure you know what they are ahead of time. If it is the policy where you work, give the couple privacy and come back later.
- A consensual sexual relationship is not possible between you and a client. You can NEVER have any sexual relationship with a client.
- Have a plan and think through how you want to handle sexual situations.

Sexual assault of any kind towards a vulnerable adult (see page 25 of the Learner’s Guide) is abuse and needs to be reported to DSHS and law enforcement.

## Disrespectful behavior

- Calm yourself. A natural response to being treated disrespectfully is anger. Learn to recognize and admit to yourself that you are feeling angry (or any other strong emotion you may have in this situation).
- Know your own warning signs. If you don’t feel you can control your emotions, take a “time out” if it is safe and appropriate in the moment. This might be leaving the room for a few minutes, taking a break or walk until you feel calmer.
- Take several deep, relaxing breaths.
- Give clear feedback. Let the client know what he or she has done that was disrespectful and how it makes you feel. Be specific, use “I” statements, and keep your comments brief and factual. For example. "When you use that tone of voice with me, I feel unappreciated and upset."
- Set clear boundaries and communicate politely how you wish to be treated.
- Stay positive. Don’t get drawn in to the client’s negative behavior.
- Listen for what the client might actually be saying behind the disrespectful words. For example, ask the client "What's wrong? Did I do something to offend you? If I did, I'm sorry." This can set the stage to resolve, rather than fuel the situation.
- Identify what, if anything, may be causing or contributing to the behavior.

## Anxiety

Chronic illness or disability may make the client more anxious than usual. Symptoms of anxiety might be worrying about small details, constant or unreasonable demands, dizziness, chills, heart pounding, irritability, depression, insomnia and poor concentration.



- Identify if there is anything contributing to anxiety such as too much caffeine, smoking, watching crime shows on television, alcohol or non-prescribed drugs, or medication side-effects. Encourage the client to decrease or stop doing those things.
- Look for the feelings behind anxious demands. For example, a person with breathing problems may demand that windows are open on a cold day because she feels she can't get enough air.
- Use comforting touch if allowed where you work and appropriate for that client. Reassuring the client that things are under control while stroking her hand may help ease the anxious feelings.
- Encourage her to:
  - Breathe deeply.
  - Spend 20-30 minutes doing some kind of deep relaxation per day such as meditation, prayer, deep breathing exercises, or visualization.
  - Get regular exercise.
  - Stay well hydrated. Dehydration contributes to anxiety.
- Try to distract the client's attention and get him or her to focus on something else. Sometimes disrupting the thought pattern is enough to stop the repetitive thoughts that are causing anxiety.





## Group Exercise

Have a volunteer explain the situation and challenging behavior he or she wrote down in the exercise on page 3. We are looking for situations where the client was angry, violent, anxious, sexual, or disrespectful.

**Volunteer:** Guard the client's confidentiality and give the objective facts only – not your opinion. Only describe what happened up until the point you were faced with the situation.

Briefly give some client background such as:

- His or her disease or condition, and level of care needed.
- Any relevant information about the client's current situation that you were aware of at the time.

Describe the challenging situation **as you first entered into it**. Include:

- What you saw and heard.
- What was happening before the behavior occurred (if you know).
- What other people, if any, were involved when the behavior occurred.

### Group:

Brainstorm:

- A possible trigger to that client's challenging behavior (at least three to five).
- Several different actions a LTC worker might use to respond to the situation (e.g. calm and soothe, distract, leave the room, etc.) and why those actions might be appropriate for this situation.
- The best action to try first and why.
- What, if anything, could a LTC worker do to prevent or minimize this behavior before it started?

### Volunteer:

Briefly describe what action you did take and how it worked. Would you do anything differently in hindsight or after what you have learned in this training?

Repeat these steps using another volunteer's example.





## Individual Exercise

1. List one thing you learned in this training that you know you are going to try the next time you are faced with a challenging situation.
  
2. List one thing covered in this training that you suspect will be **difficult for you to do** when faced with a challenging situation?

What about it makes it seem difficult.

## Small Group Exercise

Break into small groups of 3 or 4. Have a volunteer in the group share his or her answers to question 2. Brainstorm some things the person could do to make it feel less difficult. Do the same for each group member.

## Conclusion

As you have seen throughout this training, there are many things you can do to navigate through challenging behaviors. The ideas and suggestions from this training can only help if you use them.

