

Late day distress (sundowning) in dementia



Some people with dementia may become more agitated and distressed as the day progresses into evening – known as ‘late day distress’ or ‘sundowning’. It typically occurs from around 5pm, but this can vary. It is not related to the actual time of sunset. An episode of distress may be brief or last several hours.

Late day distress is thought to affect between 20% and 50% of people with dementia to some degree, and up to 80% of people with dementia in residential settings like care homes. This may be because people in care homes are likely to have more advanced dementia.

What causes late day distress?

Late day distress has a range of causes, including:

- changes in the person’s circadian rhythms (‘body clock’)
- environmental factors such as people coming home from work or school, changes in noise levels or lights coming on
- changes in the brain which affect sleep/wake cycles
- hormonal changes towards the end of the day
- medication side effects
- unmet needs, for example hunger, thirst or tiredness
- being in pain
- a lack of activity or exposure to natural light during the day
- overstimulation during the day

Signs of late day distress

Symptoms of confusion and disorientation can become more pronounced during the late afternoon and evening. The person with dementia might have an overwhelming sense that they are in the



wrong place. They might say they need to go home, even if they are already at home; or believe that they still live in a former home – often the one where they grew up.

The person might believe they need to pick their children up from school, even if they are now adults; or that they need to go to work, even if they are retired. This may make them distressed, especially if they are challenged or corrected.

Other signs of late day distress may include:

- increased vocal activity such as shouting
- pacing, walking around seemingly without purpose
- hoarding
- shadowing a family member or carer by following them around

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- confusion about who people are or what is happening around them
- in some people, aggressive behaviour
- hallucinations – these are more common in certain forms of dementia, such as Lewy body dementia

Supporting a person who is experiencing late day distress

If the person with dementia is becoming distressed and confused, try asking what is upsetting them. Listen to their response and if possible, see if you can deal with the trigger (such as by reducing noise in the environment).

If the person has difficulty communicating, look for clues in their behaviour – for example, if they are yawning, they may be overtired; or if they are holding part of their body, they may be in pain.

Talk in a slow, soothing way, with short sentences and simple instructions. Gently remind the person what day and time it is – a clock that shows the day, date, time and time of day (eg morning, afternoon, evening) may be helpful. Hold the person's hand or stroke their arm, if they find this comforting.

Avoid contradicting or arguing with the person as this may make them more distressed. You may be able to change the topic of conversation or just go along with what they are saying – for example, if they are asking to go home, you could tell them they will be going home a bit later, rather than pointing out that they are already at home.

Try to distract the person – for example, you could take them into a different room to do an activity, make them a drink, play some familiar music, watch TV or go out for a walk. If the person wants to move around or pace, give them space to do so if it is safe; you might



need to walk around with them for support if they are prone to falls or may try to leave the home.

Practical tips for preventing late day distress

- Follow a daily routine that contains activities the person enjoys and ideally includes some gentle activity and exposure to natural daylight
- If this is not possible, try placing their chair by a window as natural light may help reset their body clock
- Try to limit the person's naps during the day – if possible, avoid naps after 3pm
- Avoid large meals in the evening as they can disrupt sleep patterns
- Limit the person's intake of caffeinated drinks and alcohol

- Close the curtains and turn the lights on before dusk to ease the transition into night-time
- If possible, cover or remove mirrors and hang curtains in front of glass doors. Reflections can be confusing for some people with dementia and lead to misinterpretation, for example thinking there is another person in their home
- Introduce a predictable evening routine, for example eating dinner at a regular time, watching TV or listening to music or an audiobook
- If the person is watching TV or listening to the radio, choose something calming; sudden loud noises or shouting could cause distress
- If there are children in the house, explain the need for keeping evenings quiet and calm – for example, they could wear headphones for listening to music or playing computer games to minimise noise
- It may be helpful to keep a record of what happens before an episode of distress to establish possible triggers

If late day distress continues to be a problem, speak to the person's GP or dementia specialist as there may be an underlying cause such as pain, a sleep disorder, medication side effects or an infection. In some cases, medications to treat specific symptoms such as agitation and restlessness may be helpful.

Sources of support

If you are living with dementia or caring for someone with the condition, register for our free online sessions, ‘Dementia: what next?’ at [▶ dementiauk.org/dementia-what-next](https://dementiauk.org/dementia-what-next)

To speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse, call our free Helpline on **0800 888 6678** (Monday-Friday 9am-9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am-5pm, every day except 25th December) or email [▶ helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)

If you prefer, you can book a phone or video call with an Admiral Nurse at a time to suit you: please visit [▶ dementiauk.org/book](https://dementiauk.org/book)

Dementia UK resources

Anxiety in people with dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/managing-anxiety](https://dementiauk.org/managing-anxiety)

Changes in perception and hallucinations

[▶ dementiauk.org/changes-in-perception](https://dementiauk.org/changes-in-perception)

Coping with distress

[▶ dementiauk.org/coping-with-distress](https://dementiauk.org/coping-with-distress)

Dementia and sleep

[▶ dementiauk.org/dementia-and-sleep](https://dementiauk.org/dementia-and-sleep)

Music and dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/music](https://dementiauk.org/music)

Pain and dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/pain](https://dementiauk.org/pain)

Restlessness and agitation

[▶ dementiauk.org/dealing-with-restlessness](https://dementiauk.org/dealing-with-restlessness)

**To speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse
about any aspect of dementia:**

Contact our Helpline:

0800 888 6678 or ➔ **helpline@dementiauk.org**

Book a virtual appointment:

➔ **dementiauk.org/book**

**Our charity relies entirely on donations to fund our
life-changing work. If you would like to donate to help us
support more families:**

- Call **0300 365 5500**
- Visit ➔ **dementiauk.org/donate**
- Scan the QR code



Thank you.



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Dementia UK, 7th Floor, One Aldgate, London EC3N 1RE

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