

Understanding Dementia: Apathy

The 8 As of Dementia

Anosognosia
Amnesia
Aphasia
Agnosia

Apraxia
Altered Perceptions
Apathy
Attention Deficit

Apathy is not depression - but you can have both!

Some of these symptoms are also common in people who have depression, such as losing interest in things and lacking energy. This is why it can be hard to know whether a person has depression or apathy, even for a doctor. The main difference is that a person with depression will feel sad, tearful, hopeless or have low self-esteem (see the section 'Depression and dementia'). A person with apathy will not have these symptoms of low mood. Instead, they will feel that they have no energy or 'spark'.

Ways to help

- Try to find tasks and activities the person will enjoy and find meaningful. They may find it helpful to have a daily routine.
- Break tasks down into simple steps. They may find it easier to do several small steps rather than one big step.
- Gently prompt or help the person to start an activity, such as dressing. Give lots of encouragement to keep them engaged but try not to fuss over them. Be positive and focus on what they have achieved.
- Don't blame the person for being 'lazy', unhelpful or uncaring. The person is not choosing to have apathy.
- If you feel frustrated, try to remain as calm as you can to avoid the person reacting negatively.

Reference: <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-dementia/symptomsand-diagnosis/apathy-dementia>

Apathy: Lack of interest, enthusiasm or concern

Many people sometimes have less energy or 'drive', or lose their 'spark'. However apathy is different. If a person has apathy they will have little or no motivation to do things that they would usually find meaningful and worthwhile. Apathy is much more common in people with dementia than in older people who don't have dementia. About 2–5% of older people without dementia have apathy, but about 50–70% of people with dementia have apathy. People who have any type of dementia can have apathy. However, it is particularly common in people with frontotemporal dementia (FTD).

Causes of apathy in person with dementia

People with dementia often develop apathy due to damage to the frontal lobes of their brain. This part of the brain controls our motivation, planning and sequencing of tasks.

If a person with apathy is withdrawn, stops doing things and loses their confidence and abilities, their apathy can get worse. People who are close to them may be able to help prevent this.

Symptoms of apathy in person with dementia

A person with dementia who has apathy will be less motivated to do things. They may also:

- have no energy or motivation to do routine or daily tasks, such as brushing their teeth or having a shower
- rely on other people to suggest and organise activities
- not be interested in joining conversations or talking to new people
- not be worried about their own problems
- have unemotional responses to news or personal events – they may seem to be uninterested or detached.