

Understanding Dementia: Altered Perceptions

The 8 As of Dementia

Anosognosia
Amnesia
Aphasia
Agnosia
Apraxia
Altered Perceptions
Apathy
Attention Deficit



What is Altered Perception?

How a person with dementia experiences (or perceives) things often changes as their dementia progresses. Many people with dementia experience changes in how they understand the world around them. This is because in dementia there is damage to the brain, which can cause the person to experience things differently.

These problems can cause the person with dementia to say or do things that do not make sense to others. This can be frustrating, confusing and upsetting for the person, and for carers, especially if the person is experiencing a different reality to yours.

How can dementia affect perceptions ?

Information from the sense organs, for example the eyes or ears, travels to the brain. The brain processes this information, to understand it. The brain then analyses it alongside other information already in the brain, such as thoughts and memories and their associated emotions. Then the person becomes aware of what has been sensed (perceived).

Dementia can interrupt or slow this process down, which changes how a person understands the world around them. Damage to the eyes or parts of the brain may cause misperceptions, misidentifications, hallucinations, delusions and time-shifting.

Reference:

<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-dementia/symptoms-and-diagnosis/how-dementia-changes-perception#:~:text=People%20with%20dementia%20experience%20changes,%2C%20delusions%20and%20time-shifting>

Misperceptions and misidentifications

Misperceptions happen when the person sees one thing as something else. For example, mistaking blue floor tiles for water. Misidentifications happen when the person has problems identifying specific objects and people. For example, mistaking their son for their husband.

Some mistakes could be caused by either, for example someone may mistake their television remote for their mobile phone because:

- their visual system is damaged, and it's not clearly seen (misperceived) as a television remote
- or, it might be clearly seen as a television remote but damage in the brain causes it to be incorrectly understood (misidentified) as a mobile phone.

A person with dementia may also have 'visuospatial difficulties', when the brain has problems processing information about 3D objects. This can affect a person's spatial awareness or the ability to judge distances. They may have difficulties using stairs, parking a car, or recognizing objects.

What causes misperceptions and misidentifications

Even if the eyes of a person with dementia are healthy, their vision may be affected if the brain is damaged. Different parts of the brain process different types of information.

The occipital lobes at the back of the brain process visual information. If the occipital lobes become damaged, a person may find it hard to work out what they see in front of them. This causes misperceptions.

The brain's temporal and parietal lobes are involved in recognizing faces and objects, and in judging distances. So if those lobes become damaged, a person with dementia may have problems recognizing faces or objects. This causes misidentification.

Misperceptions and misidentifications increase with age because eyesight can get worse with age.

Older people are more likely to have poor eyesight, as well as long-term eye conditions such as glaucoma and macular degeneration. These can make their vision very blurry, or only allow them to see some of what they are looking at.

How to support someone experiencing changes in perception

- Speak to the Physician if they often have misperceptions and misidentifications, especially if these are upsetting.
- Try not to draw attention to their mistakes. Instead, gently remind the person of what is really in front of them. If they realise they have made a mistake, try to laugh about it together, if it feels appropriate. Being corrected can undermine their confidence, and they may become reluctant to join in conversations or activities.
- If a person with dementia misidentifies someone, it can be distressing for everyone. If this happens, ask friends and relatives to introduce themselves when they arrive, and wear name stickers or tags.
- Try to reassure the person that everyone makes mistakes and find tactful ways to help them, including frequent name reminders or explanations about why people are there.
- Try to keep doing the things they enjoy. For example, if they enjoyed reading but can't due to problems with their vision, try audiobooks instead. For more information on activities and staying involved, see Keeping active and involved. <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/stayingindependent/keeping-active-dementia-practical-tips>
- Try to be reassuring and help the person with dementia to feel safe. For example, they may be reluctant to cross a shiny floor, as it may appear to them as wet or icy. Offer them an arm, or lead them by walking ahead, so that they can see the floor is safe to walk on.
- Improve lighting levels and reduce visual clutter to see if this helps. For example, an ornament's shadow could resemble the 'dog' or 'person' they say they can see. This may be helped by simply changing the lighting.
- If the person wears glasses or a hearing aid, make sure they are wearing them and that they are working correctly.
- At mealtimes, it may help to tactfully describe the food and drink, where it is on the table and which cutlery to use. This may prevent them mistaking the jug of water for their glass, or something similar.
- When passing something to a person with dementia, remind them how it is used.
- Tell the person when someone enters or leaves the room, to avoid confusion and misidentification.
- You can try to prevent or reduce misperceptions and misidentifications for a person with dementia at home. Making your home dementia friendly will help with practical tips.

Caregiving is a marathon and not a sprint.

Equipping yourself for the long haul is essential. *Lisa Mayfield*

You shouldn't walk the caregiving journey alone. *Founder and Principal, Aging Wisdom*