

Apathy

A Symptom of Dementia

For patients with dementia or their caregivers

Read this guide to learn:

- The signs of apathy
- How to cope with apathy
- Where to get more information



What is apathy?

Apathy is a symptom of dementia. The term apathy means when a person loses interest in what is happening around them. Although losing interest may not seem like a behaviour problem, it can be very hard for caregivers to handle.

What are the signs of apathy?

The person with apathy:

- Finds it hard to start and complete a task.
- Does not have as much of an emotional response to both good and bad events.
- Has little interest or energy.
- Does not share new ideas or show curiosity about what is happening around them.

A person with apathy may not be very worried about these symptoms, but that doesn't mean they aren't important. Apathy gets in the way of everyday activities. It can make life less enjoyable and can increase stress on caregivers.

Common myths about people with apathy

- × **Myth:** They've stopped doing their household chores. Isn't it laziness?
- ✓ **Facts:** Scientists who study the brain (neuroscientists) have found that apathy happens because of problems in the brain's motivation pathways.

If 100 people had Alzheimer's, about 70 out of 100 will develop apathy as a symptom. Sometimes apathy happens before memory problems.

- ✗ **Myth:** They just sit there doing nothing. Are they depressed?
- ✓ **Facts:** Apathy can look a lot like depression. There are some differences between depression and apathy.

People with depression:

- Are usually sad and do not experience much happiness.
- Have thoughts of guilt, hopelessness, worthlessness, and sometimes want to die.

People with apathy:

- Do not care about what is happening around them.
- Can feel happiness or joy when they are doing an activity.



Remember: Some people can have apathy and depression at the same time. If you're worried about someone with these symptoms, talk with your doctor.

Is there a medicine to treat apathy?

There are no medicines that treat apathy.

Some people with apathy and Alzheimer's disease have had success using cholinesterase inhibitors. Also, stimulant medicines have been used but more studies need to be done.

How can I cope with apathy?

Try these things when caring for a person with apathy.

Find out why the person suffering from apathy is not able to do their usual activities.

- Have they forgotten how to do the activity?

or

- Are they forgetting to do the activity?

Set up an easy daily routine with a schedule, calendar and reminders.

A person with apathy finds it easier to start an activity once it becomes a habit. Try to:

- Break down tasks into smaller steps.
- Go on regular outings or to a regular drop-in program.

Try different ways of suggesting activities.

For example, instead of asking, "Do you want to go for a walk?" you can say, "It's time to go on our afternoon walk" and hand them their coat and shoes.

Use the things that they still enjoy to help get them moving. For example:

- food
- visits with grandchildren
- music
- movies

You may find yourself getting impatient or upset when caring for someone with apathy. This is completely normal.

Get help and support.

- Join a support group, see a counselor, or talk to a good friend.

Take a break when you need to.

- Take regular breaks to do something that you enjoy. This can make it easier to be patient.

Where to get more information about apathy and dementia

[Alzheimer's Society of Canada](#)

[University of California, San Francisco](#)

Topic: [Frontotemporal dementia: alleviating symptoms of apathy](#)

UHN Brochure: "[Managing Caregiver Stress](#)"

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