Need-driven dementia-compromised behavior: An alternative view of disruptive behavior

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Abstract

The disruptive behavior of persons with dementia is a problem of considerable clinical interest and growing scientific concern. This paper offers a view of these behaviors as expressions of unmet needs or goals and provides a comprehensive conceptual framework to guide further research and clinical practice. Empirical findings and clinical impressions related to wandering, vocalizations and aggression to support and illustrate the framework are presented.

Introduction

Disruptive behaviors displayed by demented elderly often result in nursing home placement¹ and challenge the skills of even the best-trained nursing personnel. Despite increasing attention from researchers to behaviors such as wandering, vocalizations and aggression, efforts to explain these phenom-

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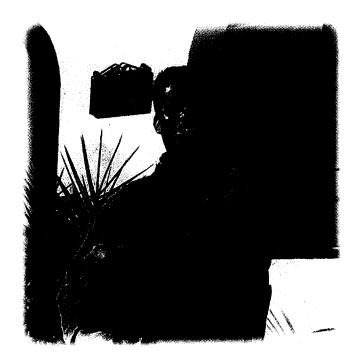
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ena remain incomplete. Based on empirical works and clinical experience, we propose a framework from which to study these behaviors by considering their purpose or meaning to persons who display them. Within this view, wandering, vocalizations and aggression represent each of the three categories of disruptive behavior identified by Cohen-Mansfield and associates. Empirical works and clinical impressions supporting the framework are reviewed. Finally, wandering, vocalization and aggression serve as examples for application to clinical practice and research.

Disruptive behavior is a term that reflects the caregiver's view more than the cognitively-impaired (CI) person's perspective in a situation. While behaviors such as wandering or repetitive questioning may interfere with or disrupt clinical care routines, they may actually express or embody the CI person's goal or needs.² Seen this way, these behaviors become meaningful and therefore, potentially useful in directing nursing care. Researchers can use this framework to better identify CI persons at greatest risk and to isolate those needs with highest likelihood of precipitating these behaviors. From such knowledge, researchers can develop and test targeted intervention strategies for these need-driven, dementia-compromised behaviors (NDB).

Within our framework, depicted in Figure 1, we believe NDBs arise in pursuit of a goal or as expression of a need. As such, NDBs reflect the interaction of salient background and proximal factors found within either CI persons or their immediate environment or both. Although disruptive, dysfunctional, or ineffective from an objective stance, NDBs constitute the most integrated and meaningful response possible, given limitations imposed by a dementing condition, strengths preserved from the person's basic abilities and personality, and

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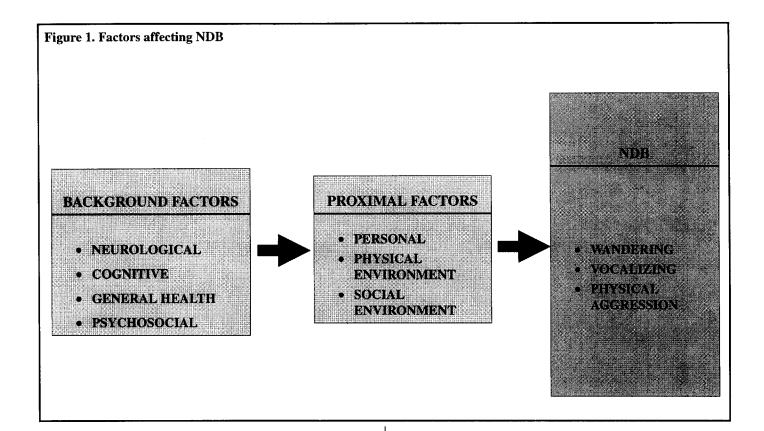
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constraints, challenges, or supports offered by the immediate environment.

Background factors thought to operate in producing NDBs include the somewhat stable neurological, cognitive, health status, as well as psychosocial factors. Proximal factors are the more fluid or fluctuating aspects of the immediate physical and social environment and the dynamic or changing needs and states within the CI person. Proximal factors are likely to precipitate NDBs.

According to our literature review, some background and proximal variables may operate across a range of NDBs, while others affect only a specific behavior, such as wandering. Figure 2 lists variables thought pertinent to multiple NDBs, as well as those considered important to wandering, vocalization and aggression. Investigation of background factors can lead to the development of risk profiles for NDBs. By isolating relevant proximal factors, a promising set of ideas for developing general and specific nursing interventions for NDBs can result. However, this framework, while more comprehensive than other efforts to explain disruptive behaviors, needs validation and refinement for overall and specific NDBs, such as wandering, vocalization and aggression.

Wandering

Locomotion can range from the speed and endurance of a long distance runner to the ability to bear weight and maintain balance in a frail elder. One's wayfinding ability involves a destination (goal), a route (series of mental operations or decision points), and physical ability to move through space. In dementia, wandering might reflect diminished wayfinding ability in pursuit of a need or goal. A cognitive change, such as an attention deficit, might interfere with one's ability to keep a goal or destination in mind. Similarly, a lifetime preference for motion as a stress reducer, might induce walking, even without a destination.^{3,4} Likewise, physical aspects of an environment, such as noise or bright lights, might grasp one's attention or curiosity and thus, draw a person toward them, while certain social aspects, such as crowding, may induce fear or discomfort, and thus, repel a person. Wandering may reflect a variety of needs or goals under varying personal and environmental circumstances. Information about the relationship between these goals, needs, environmental conditions and particular rhythms and patterns of wandering, will provide the foundation for designing and targeting effective interventions.

Vocalizations

Communicating one's needs may entail an extensive discussion or a simple gesture, such as pointing. Communication involves a felt need, one's awareness of the need, and the ability (verbal or non-verbal) to make the need known to others. In dementia, disruptive vocalizations may represent lessened ability to communicate. Memory loss may cause residents to forget that they have expressed a need or that it has been met, resulting in repeated questions. Similarly, noisy behavior may represent an effort to fulfill a need for sensory stimulation. Likewise, when physical conditions are unpleasant, such as during a cold

Figure 2. Background and proximal factors affecting NDC behavior

en e	
Background	
Neurological factors	
Specific regional brain involven	ent
Neurotransmitter imbalance	
Circadian rhythm deterioration	1
Motor ability	
Cognitive factors	
Attention	
Memory	
Visuo-spatial ability	
Language skills	
Health status	
General health	
Functional ability	
Affective state	
Psychosocial factors	
Gender	
Education	
Occupation	
Personality type	
History of psychosocial stress	
Behavioral response to stress	

Personal factors			
	Emotions		
	Physiological need states		
	Functional performance		
	Physical environment		
	Light level		
	Noise level		
	Temperature		
	Social environment		
	Ward ambience		
	Staff stability		
	Staff mix		

And Constitution of the Co		
ND Behavior		

Dimension		
Frequency		
Frequency Duration		

SPECIFICT	SPECIFIC TO WANDERING		
Level of social engagement	Pattern		
Complexity of design	Percent cycle locomoting		
Crowding	24-hour distribution		
en grande de la companya de la comp La companya de la co			
Match of assistance to ability	Туре		
Presence of others	Pitch		
İ	Volume		
	Interval		
	24-hour distribution		
	er Gerling ander 1870 b		
Room size	Туре		
Speed of caregiving	Care procedure		
Staff burnout	-		
Caregiver demeanor and banter			

shower, vocalization may serve as a means of drawing attention to the discomfort of a situation.

Aggression

When CI persons can no longer meet their needs or goals, they may become aggressive to deal with the resulting frustration. Thus, aggression might reflect diminished ability to deal with frustration or ambiguity. Some neuropsychological changes such as disinhibition, may interfere with their ability to self-regulate or execute behavior independent of environmental influences. A person with a hostile premorbid personality may

become more aggressive as damage to the cortex results in disinhibition of these tendencies. Likewise, inappropriate assistance with activities of daily living (ADLs) may threaten personal abilities, obstruct goal-directed activity and lead to aggression.

Background factors affecting NDB

Neurological factors

Ongoing studies of neurological factors in CI individuals may help clarify brain-behavior relationships in AD and other dementias. A connection between NDBs and neurological factors has been documented in studies examining regional brain damage, neurotransmitter imbalances, circadian rhythm disturbances and motor ability.

Regional CNS damage

Damage to certain regions of the central nervous system (CNS) may contribute to NDB. However, areas of reduced brain function vary greatly in dementia. Recent longitudinal studies using positron emission tomography (PET) scans have shown increased right/left metabolic asymmetry in patients with Alzheimer's disease (AD).^{6,7} Lateralized defects and areas of reduced cerebral glucose metabolism correspond to some language and visuospatial impairments. In a sample of 33 patients with AD, four metabolic sub-groups emerged using principal components analysis. The prevalence of NDB differed among the subgroups.⁸

Some NDBs may result from a particular region of brain damage. Wanderers performed more poorly on tests of parietal lobe functioning than did CI controls. 9,10 In a study of 27 consecutive AD patients with recent PET scans, reduced left-sided brain function appeared to induce anxiety-tension (r = .33) and hostility (r = .52). 11 Agitation, inappropriate behavior, and personality change corresponded with reduced cerebral glucose metabolism in CI subjects with paralimbic deficits (n = 8). 8

Neurotransmitters

In AD, cholinergic, nonadrenergic, and serotonergic innervation of the cerebral cortex showed degeneration on postmortem examination. Another postmortem study, documented reductions in serotonin and 5-hydroxyindoleacetic acid (5-HIAA) in the superior frontal and inferior temporal lobes, fusiform gyri, and temporal lobe 17 institutionalized demented subjects when compared with 18 matched controls.

Increased locomotor activity and restlessness of wandering behavior may stem from a relative excess of dopamine, as compared to acetylcholine in AD victims.¹⁴ While no direct evidence links neurotransmitters with wandering or disruptive vocalizations, they are likely involved in aggressive behavior. In 26 nondemented persons with various personality disorders, low concentrations of 5-HIAA, a serotonin metabolite in human cerebral spinal fluid, corresponded with increased aggression (r=-.78).¹⁵ Low levels of 5-HIAA in adulthood corresponded with a history of deviant and suicidal behavior in childhood. ¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Together, these findings implicate decreased serotonin in the brain as a basis for impulsive behavior. ¹⁹ Aggressive behavior in some patients with AD may be related to loss of serotonin.

Circadian circuitry

The hypothalamic suprachiasmatic nucleus, associated with information processing and rhythm generation, shows a decrease in size and number of cells releasing vasopressin in subjects over 80-years old and an even greater decrease in those with AD.²⁰ A disturbed circadian distribution of locomotor activity has been documented in AD²¹ and in wanderers.²² An

end-of-day pattern in agitation and seasonal variation in sundowning suggest involvement of the circadian system.²³

Motor ability

Ability to wash one's face, maintain balance while turning, and tie shoelaces differentiated functional level among three groups of nursing home residents (independent, requiring assistance, and dependent),²⁴ many of whom are CI. Inability to walk unassisted can predict urinary incontinence in CI nursing home residents.²⁵ Motor ability may likewise affect NDB. For example, loss of motor ability necessary to ambulate or to propel a wheelchair effectively eliminates wandering. In fact, efforts at restraint or limiting mobility are based upon this logic. Poor motor ability possibly plays a role in verbally disruptive behavior or aggression. Immobility can limit one's ability to satisfy their personal needs and may result in vocalization, frustration and aggression.

Cognitive factors

Basic cognitive skills (attention and memory)

The number of NDBs significantly increases with greater cognitive impairment. ^{26,27} A sample of autopsy-confirmed AD patients (n = 28) showed a significant progressive relationship between cognitive deficits, behavioral impairments and poor performance on the Haycox Dementia Behavior scale. ²⁸ However, the frequency of NDB declines in late stage dementia. ²⁹

Few studies have correlated specific neurocognitive deficits with particular disruptive behaviors. Wanderers have higher levels of global cognitive impairment. ^{9,30} Wandering also may result from spatial disorientation, visuoconstructive deficits, ³¹ or poor abstract thinking, spatial, and judgment skills. ⁹ As dementia progresses, agitated and aggressive behaviors also increase. ³²⁻³⁶ Resistive behavior during bathing corresponds highly, but indirectly, with memory, attention and visuospatial deficits. ³⁷

Perceptual and sensory skills

People with AD experience problems in color vision, depth perception, eye movements, contrast sensitivity and higher order visual perception.³⁸ Heminopsia and other visual field losses likewise occur with strokes. Odor recognition, identification, and memory, have also been reported.^{39,40}

Limited indirect evidence suggests that these sensory alterations may influence NDB. Stripes in various patterns placed upon the floor in front of doorways and various camouflage techniques applied to doors and their opening mechanisms resulted in fewer attempted exits by wanderers. Al,42 Clinical evidence also suggests that wanderers move more often to locations within their immediate line of vision as opposed to those located further away.

Language

A range of altered speech and language skills, such as word

finding deficiencies and paraphrasias, occurs in dementia. Language alterations may relate to NDB to the degree that they inhibit effective communication.

Algase⁹ demonstrated that language skills best differentiated wanderers from nonwanderers who were better able to read, follow directions and name objects. Language deficits also may relate to resistive behavior during bathing.³⁷ To effectively deal with frustration or threat, the individual must autoarticulate thoughts, feelings, and goals, a function of the left hemisphere language system. In turn, the individual must plan and evaluate behavior and its effect on the physical and social world, a function of the frontal lobe. Damage to these regions may result in an inability to use inner speech to modulate behavior⁴³ and may account for dysfunctional vocalizations as well.

Health status

General health

Little research has examined relationships between general health status or specific health conditions and behavioral issues in dementia. In one study, CI patients with more physical problems, such as cardiovascular disease and surgery, exhibited verbally agitated behaviors while those with fewer diagnoses displayed physically non-aggressive behaviors (*e.g.*, wandering).⁴⁴ Limited clinical evidence also links cardiovascular disease to nocturnal wandering,⁴⁵ urinary tract infections to aggression⁴⁶ and infection to vocalizations.^{47,48}

Functional ability

Researchers have demonstrated a direct relationship between the extent of cognitive impairment and decline in both ADL and instrumental ADL (IADL). While we can extrapolate some of this knowledge to explain NDB, relationships remain unclear. Higher levels of functional ability may enable CI persons to partially satisfy their needs and goals, thus reducing NDBs. Conversely, lower levels of functional ability may hamper personal need satisfaction and result in wandering, vocalization or aggression.

Affect

Clinical impressions and limited empirical evidence support an association of certain persistent affective states and behavior in dementia. Anxiety may induce screaming.⁵¹ Presence and severity of depression significantly predicted functional status.⁵² Likewise, depression and screaming are connected.⁴⁴ However, no relationship appeared to exist between depression and wandering in the same study.

Psychosocial factors

Demographics

Researchers have studied gender, age, education, and other demographic factors as risks for AD and vascular dementia, but the connection between these variables and behaviors in dementia has received scant attention. A large nursing home survey (N = 3,351) detected no gender difference for wandering behavior, ²⁶ even though men and women generally differ in spatial abilities. Subjects who displayed physically non-aggressive behavior tended to be younger, *i.e.*, 75-80 years old. Women engaged in more noisiness (10.7 percent vs 8 percent), while males were more abusive (16.8 percent vs. 10.1 percent). An association may exist between occupational roles and certain types of wandering behavior.4

Personality, stress, and behavioral responses to stress

Personality, the dynamic organization of psychophysiological systems within the person determines the person's unique pattern of adjustment to the environment.⁵³ One criterion used to diagnose dementia is personality change.⁵⁴ Personality and life events may be salient to NDB.

Recent studies of personality in AD illustrate a significant change in major domains as judged by caregivers when asked to compare premorbid and present personality of mild to moderately demented patients. ⁵⁵⁻⁵⁸ Extraversion and conscientiousness decreased while neuroticism increased. However, assessed by correlating premorbid and current scores, a person's position in the sample remained relatively constant (range of r's = .67-.79).

No one has specifically studied the personality of wanderers or verbally agitated CI persons. However, according to Dawson and Reid,⁵⁹ wanderers tended to have an intact social facade. Chart audits of the social history of eight institutionalized wanderers indicated that wandering may be related to lifelong patterns of coping with stress.4 In a comparison of premorbid psychosocial patterns among wanderers and nonwanderers, family members recalled wanderers as having engaged in higher levels of social and leisure activities (t = 3.36, p = .003), experienced more stressful life events (t = 4.88, p = .000), shown a motoric reaction to stress (t = 6.79, p = .000), and demonstrated a more motoric behavioral style (t = 5.69, p =.000). Of 408 nursing home residents, those who engaged in physically non-aggressive behaviors (e.g., pacing, wandering) were more likely to have been separated from spouse (t = 4.05, p < .01), had financial problems (t = 2.38, p < .05), survived a life-threatening experience (t = 3.61, p < .01), or immigrated (t = 3.61) = 3.09, p < .01) (3).). In related work, nursing home residents exposed to a life-threatening experience (N = 154) screamed significantly more than unexposed residents (N = 168; t(322) = 1.98, p < .05) (44). Though personality does not account entirely for life events, it may be a deciding element in one's choices. In a four-year longitudinal study (N = 83), extraversion predisposed one to positive events (r = .24. p < .05) and neuroticism to negative ones (r = .23, p < .05).⁶⁷

In a sample of 38 subjects, Chatterjee and associates⁵⁵ found that caregivers recalled AD patients with paranoid delusions as having been more hostile (partial r = .42). Further, studies of demented persons have linked premorbid personality to depres-

 $sion^{60,61}$ and aggression. ⁶²⁻⁶⁴ Those who displayed aggressive behavior were more likely to have had financial problems (t = 2.43, p < .05). ³²

Proximal factors affecting NDB: Personal factors

Emotions

From a clinical perspective, wandering may be "agenda" behavior, arising from intermittent feelings of anxiety, frustration, or boredom.² Even cognitively intact persons scream or strike out when afraid. While clinical observations such as these are prevalent, no one has systematically evaluated them.

Physiological need states

A variety of need states, such as fatigue, pain, or hunger, may produce NDB. The most evidence for a link between physiological states and these behaviors exists with sleep. A number of studies have shown more sleep disruption in demented patients than in age-matched controls. Dementia patients typically experience lowered sleep efficiency, higher percentage of stage one sleep, and greater frequency of arousals and awakenings. Sleep efficiency and number of awakenings correlated with severity of dementia. Further, the incidence of sleep-related respiratory disturbance (SRRD) is greater in the elderly 2-74 and is associated with frequent nocturnal awakenings. However, researchers have conflicting data on whether demented persons display higher levels of SRRD than do aged controls. SRRD

Wandering may stem from frequent nocturnal awakening, whether caused by staff ⁴⁴ or SRRD. ²³ Verbally-agitated behaviors likewise relate to fewer hours of sleep ⁴⁴ and more reported pain. ³² However, the relationships should be viewed with caution because nursing staff measured sleep pattern and pain retrospectively. By disturbing nighttime sleep, staff can increase aggression in residents during the day. ³² Anxiety and hostility also are associated with SRRD. ²³ Experience has shown that a bath, attempted when a CI person is tired, may induce resistance, aggression, or screaming.

Functional performance

As discussed earlier, high or low functional ability may predispose some CI persons to various NDBs by sustaining or limiting their ability to pursue personal needs or goals. However, functional performance may fall short of actual functional ability.⁷⁷ Created when caregivers impose unnecessary constraints or overdo for the CI person, this excess disability or forced dependency may produce NDB as a rebound phenomenon.⁷⁸

Physical environment

The physical environment is the overall setting including its layout, design, and routines. It also includes light, noise, and temperature. Both a macro and micro view may be important for modulating NDB. An environment designed to reduce stimulation and pace activities to residents' tolerances can reduce catastrophic reactions.⁷⁹ Institutional routines such as bed checks and linen changes correspond with sundowning⁸⁰ and increased aggressive behavior.³² On a micro-level, exposure to bright light therapy can reduce restlessness and agitation⁸¹ and improve sleep in CI persons.⁸² Our clinical observations also suggest that noise and high levels of activity in confined spaces can increase wandering and vocalizations, perhaps by overwhelming residents' attentional or cognitive capacity or by inducing anxiety.

Social environment

The social environment encompasses social contacts, personal network and caregivers. Both wandering⁴ and screaming⁸³ are associated with greater time alone. The overall level of agitated behaviors is related to a lack of intimacy in the social network. ^{83,84} Disruptive behaviors occur more frequently with primarily unlicensed personnel who lack adequate preparation for reducing environmental demands. ⁸⁵

Some dimensions of an environment have both physical and social properties. For example, legibility (the immediacy with which one can comprehend or understand an environment) is reflected in clear and consistent physical characteristics (e.g., floor plans, seating arrangements) and social conventions (e.g., staffing and programming). On a macro-level, a highly legible environment may help reduce NDBs. 86 On a micro-level, the warmth of an environment may lessen aggression during showers or baths. A comfortable room temperature together with a caregiver's inviting demeanor create an atmosphere inconsistent with aggressive outbursts. While offering great potential as a source of intervention, the impact of social and physical environment, upon disruptive behaviors has received little conceptual development or empirical study.

Applications to practice and research

Our proposed framework offers one perspective for organizing and integrating relevant empirical findings and clinical impressions to deal with the complex issue of disruptive behavior in dementia. While we cannot manipulate some elements of the model, particularly background factors, knowledge of these can provide direction in identifying those at risk and suggesting how to specifically modify the environment for those exhibiting a particular behavior. Narrower models provide more limited guidance and do not allow for the confounding effects of other variables. Using a narrower framework, for example, we can predict the pattern of cognitive impairment by discovering metabolic asymmetries. Accordingly, a greater degree of language, rather than visuospatial difficulties, usually accompanies left-sided hypometabolism. Thus, affected individuals may respond better to gestures than verbal communication. With a comprehensive framework, we can combine knowledge of this pattern of impairment with that of other possible risk factors and situational precipitants to identify individuals at highest

risk. Thus, development of more targeted strategies for use with particular individuals or clinical subgroups under various sets of identifiable environmental circumstances can proceed.

Further, we can refine our framework to apply to a specific NDB. By using the framework to organize research findings pertinent to one behavior, we can highlight important directions for research and practice. In figure 2, for example, we have extracted variables specific to NDBs presented in this paper and organized them into working sets of proximal factors. Accordingly, nurses in a clinical setting attempting to modify wandering for a given CI person might increase social interaction. Researchers interested in clarifying the neuropsychological basis of wandering might compare wandering output, pattern, and distribution while controlling for level of social engagement, crowding and complexity of physical design. Guided by the framework, those developing interventions might examine effects of various kinds and degrees of environmental cueing for effect on amount and pattern of wandering.

Similarly, we can apply concepts and their relationships salient to vocalizations. For example, persons who are spending much of their time alone because their social environment provides little opportunity for interaction may shout or repeat words or phrases as a means of stimulation. Providing a talking book may decrease vocalizations by providing stimulation. Likewise, the pain of a urinary tract infection may be causing a patient to scream when toileted. By observing the timing and frequency of vocalizations, clinicians can obtain clues about the cause of it. Researchers might explore the neuropsychological basis of vocalizations by examining relationships between language skills, memory loss, and various types of vocalizations while controlling for important environmental factors.

Finally, we can approach the study of aggression from this framework. Accordingly, clinicians might prevent or ameliorate aggression by encouraging caregivers to respect personal space and to interact in a relaxed and warm manner. Researchers might explore the role of sleep pattern or the introduction of natural elements into the environment in affecting aggression in late-stage dementia. This comprehensive framework provides a view of behavioral issues in dementia with the potential to advance humane care and the science that should undergird it. When cast as expressions of unmet needs or goals arising in the context of relevant background and proximal factors, behaviors of CI persons may eventually become better understood and managed.

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