
WHY WON'T
SHE TAKE A
BATH?
HELPING YOUR
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Olivia Hernandez has lived with her daughter, Gabriela, for many years. She used to help around the house, babysitting, cooking, cleaning and gardening. In recent years Olivia has experienced some memory problems and confusion which have decreased her ability to help her daughter. About a year ago Gabriela noticed that her mother's hygiene was not as good as it used to be. As she paid more attention, Gabriela noticed that Olivia was not bathing for many days at a time. When she asked her mother about this, Olivia angrily denied it and said she was bathing every day. Gabriela had to work hard to figure out strategies for helping her mother bathe regularly without offending her sense of pride.

This is a common scenario in many families. Bathing is often the first personal care task that a person with dementia needs help with and it can be a very touchy and difficult issue. There are many possible causes of bathing challenges, but one of the most common is that people feel their privacy and dignity are being violated. We are all used to bathing ourselves, taking ourselves to the toilet and dressing ourselves. Research indicates that many of the aggressive, angry behaviors we see in people with dementia, occur in the context of personal care such as bathing.

Understanding that our family members often feel shame and a sense of violation when they need help with bathing is an important piece of solving bathing problems.

You might start approaching the bathing problem by asking yourself the kinds of questions that are listed in the **Becoming a Detective** section.

Possible Physical, Medical and Emotional Causes of Bathing Problems

- Brain changes from some forms of dementia can affect the bathing situation in a variety of ways:
 - Memory loss can cause people to lose track of when they have bathed. She may believe that she showered this morning when, in reality, it was several days ago.
 - Sequencing of tasks often becomes difficult in dementia. Bathing is a complex task made up of many steps. For some it may become too complicated and overwhelming.
- Pain from arthritis, neuropathy (nerve damage, see **Glossary**) or other causes may make bathing such a chore that it is avoided.
- Untreated depression can make it difficult for individuals to have the energy or desire to do anything that takes too much effort. For a frail older person, bathing can be strenuous.
- Fatigue, which often increases with dementia and can be a symptom of depression as well, makes it too difficult. Many people need to rest after bathing.
- Feeling one's privacy is being violated, as mentioned above, is often a primary cause of avoiding bathing.

- Fear of slipping or falling can cause individuals to avoid bathing. Many older people know that bathrooms are a common site of accidents, broken hips, etc. If balance is an issue or the bathroom is not well adapted (see below – **Environmental Strategies**), this may be a possible reason your relative avoids bathing.
- Water may not feel good on your relative’s skin any more. Sometimes because of changes in the brain, people experience the sensation of water differently. Their sense of temperature may have changed. Or sometimes people will say the water is painful on their skin or feels like “bugs crawling” or “pins and needles.” Clearly if the sensation of water is unpleasant people will avoid it.
- In later stages of dementia, it is not uncommon for people to feel frightened of having water come over their heads and faces.

Strategies to Try for Possible Physical, Medical and Emotional Causes of Bathing Problems

- If problems start suddenly, always suspect an infection or another medical cause and take your relative to her doctor.
- Have your relative evaluated for pain or depression if you suspect these causes. Sometimes an aspirin or anti-inflammatory prior to bathing can be very helpful, but check first with your relative’s physician.
- When memory loss is the cause, you might try a bathing chart with dates on it or marking a calendar. Some people respond well to this; it makes others angry.
- If your relative becomes confused or overwhelmed, simplify the task of bathing for her. This might involve setting up the bathroom, getting the water the right temperature, helping with undressing. She might be able to bathe herself with just a little assistance.
- Think about the time of day. While you want to try to follow your relative’s prior bathing habits and schedule, you also want to pay attention to fatigue levels. If she’s always bathed at night but is now exhausted or more confused by early evening you might try a different time of day.
- Ask your relative why she doesn’t like to bathe. She may be able to tell you the reason herself, especially if it is fear, pain or privacy issues.
- When privacy is the primary issue, try some of the strategies listed in **Ensuring Comfort and Privacy**, later in this section.
- When the water doesn’t feel right, try some of the strategies listed in **Ensuring Comfort and Privacy**.
- Separating hair washing from bathing may help with the fear and discomfort of having water on the head. Some care partners arrange for beauty parlor visits for hair washing or try using a dry shampoo.
- Give her a washcloth to hold over her face during hair washing.
- A shampoo tray that allows you to wash your relative’s hair while she sits in a chair may help her feel more comfortable and less fearful of getting wet.

Possible Environmental Causes of Bathing Problems

Jack Spangler stopped bathing as his dementia progressed. Rachel, his wife, asked him to shower with her one morning to see if she could understand it. Jack was very hesitant. As he tried to climb over the tub to get in, she realized that he was shivering, that there was nothing for him to hold onto, and that he was very frightened. She was able to work with a local social service agency to have grab bars and a hand held shower installed and to purchase a shower chair. She bought a heater to warm the bathroom ahead of time and made sure she was in the room to reassure Jack when he showered.

- The bathroom may not feel safe.
- The bathroom may be too cold or the room too drafty.
- The lighting may be poor, making the room frightening or causing hallucinations.
- The water temperature fluctuates causing unexpected cold or hot spells.
- The bath or shower controls may be unfamiliar and difficult for her to operate.
- There may be too much clutter, distracting your relative from focusing on bathing.
- There may not be enough color contrast between the bathing area and bathing supplies. For example, a white bathtub, white washcloth and white bar of soap may all blend in together, making it difficult for your relative to locate the washcloth and soap.

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Strategies to Try for Possible Environmental Causes of Bathing Problems

- Evaluate the bathroom for needed adaptations for safety or ease getting in and out. See websites at the end of this chapter for home modification information. Common adaptations include:
 - Grab bars
 - Hand held showers, which can give the person more control
 - Shower or bath chairs or bath transfer benches
 - Installing a walk-in shower
- Try heating up the bathroom ahead of time.
- Improve the lighting if it is dim. Sometimes it is dark behind shower curtains, which scares people.
- De-clutter the bathroom if that is an issue, especially if your relative becomes confused or distracted during the bathing process.

Safety Strategies in the Bathroom

- Adjust the temperature setting on the water heater to no more than 120 degrees.
- Use non-slip, washable bathmats inside and outside of the tub or shower.
- Make sure the floor of the tub or shower is non-slip material or has a bathmat. Test it yourself to see if it is slippery with soapsuds on it.
- Do not leave your relative alone while she is bathing in the later stages of illness.
- Don't use breakable glass containers in the bathroom.

Possible Communication Challenges Related to Bathing Problems

- Communication is often a large factor when a person is reluctant to bathe. Without meaning to, care partners often sound bossy, especially when they are tired or frustrated and just want their relative to take a bath. This tends to breed resentment and resistance to being told what to do.
- Caregivers may not be explaining things clearly enough or giving step by step instructions. If your relative does not understand what's going on, it may increase her fear or anxiety.

Ensuring Comfort and Privacy

Joan McCay hated having anyone assist her with bathing and became quite angry whenever it was attempted. Her daughter, Alice, began to think about the whole bathing experience from "setting the stage" for a bath to sharing a pleasant experience with her mother after the bath was finished. She decided to try a new approach. First, Alice got the bathroom ready and turned on the heater. Then she and her mother looked at a favorite photo album together. Next Alice said, "Mom, the shower is ready. Let me help you off with your shirt and give you a hand into the shower so you don't slip." Joan started to get angry and Alice replied, "Mom, John is coming to visit later and I know you want to look nice. I'll help you." After she had her mom seated in the shower, Alice used the hand held sprayer to help her get the water the right temperature. Then she put a towel around her shoulders, gave her mother the washcloth and had her wash while Alice held the sprayer the way her mother wanted it. When Joan was dressed again, Alice had a snack waiting for her. Although there were some tense moments, the bathing process went much more smoothly than in the past. Alice practiced remaining calm and ignoring angry outbursts.

- Try to make the bathroom as comfortable, warm and inviting as possible.
- Think about how you are going to approach this conversation ahead of time if your relative resists bathing. What can you use as a hook or reward? Alice used John's upcoming visit. Some caregivers have used an upcoming trip to church, synagogue or mosque. Others have used a dish of ice cream or a treat as a reward at the end of the bath or shower.

- Try to give the person as much control as possible – over the decision and over the process. Instead of asking, “*Would you like to take your bath now?*” Try asking, “*Would you like your bath now, before you get dressed, or tonight before bed?*” This gives the person a feeling of more control.
- Sometimes it’s better to be direct and simple. “*Harold, your bath is ready.*”
- Try to mimic previous routines as much as possible to make it feel familiar. Ask about the preferred soap, hair washing method, etc. All of us have routines that we rely on and it can be uncomfortable when these are changed, especially if someone is switching from a bath to a shower, from morning to night, or some other large change in routine.
- Try as much as possible to schedule bathing at the same time she is used to.
- Try to schedule the bath or shower in the morning or at night so there is not unnecessary dressing and redressing in the middle of the day, as this can be tiring and confusing.
- Music can help create a calming environment. If there is a type of soft music that your relative enjoys, you might try playing it throughout the bathing process.
- If your relative particularly dislikes receiving help from a family member, consider hiring a home health aide to assist with bathing. If you do, you might want to have the aide help with other things as well, such as changing beds or laundry. You might not want to introduce bathing until your relative has established a relationship with the aide.
- Encourage your relative to test the temperature of the water before getting into the tub or shower. Continue to ask about the temperature throughout the process.
- Drape a towel over your relative’s shoulders or lap if privacy is an issue. Some families have had the person shower in her underwear or bathing suit to protect modesty.
- Warm a towel in the dryer ahead of time if your relative tends to get cold.
- Monitor your relative’s skin for sores or skin breakdown, especially if incontinence is an issue or if she is sitting most of the time.
- Check your relative’s feet for skin sores, dry skin, ingrown nails or nails that need trimming.
- If your relative is frightened by the water needed to wash her hair, try wetting her head with washcloths, baby shampoo, rinsing with a small amount of water, and deflecting water from face and ears.
- Give her a washcloth to hold over her face so the water does not go into her eyes or mouth.
- Try a bed bath for a person who is in the late stages of dementia, is very frail, has very limited mobility, or is very frightened and agitated when bathing. Again, a home health aide could be very helpful with this.
- No matter how much sensitivity and care is put into the bathing process, there are times when it can be a considerable challenge.

References and Resources

Web sites for general information on home modifications and products including bathrooms:

www.infinitec.org/live/homemodifications/bathrooms.htm

www.eldercare.gov/Eldercare.NET/Public/Resources/Factsheets/Home_Modifications.aspx

www.makoa.org

www.abledata.com (Go to products, then environmental adaptations, then bathrooms.)