

Triggers for Adverse Behaviors

You're walking down the hall to answer a call light when you notice Mr. Jones sitting in his wheelchair and talking to himself in an agitated manner. You only have a moment, but you want to briefly reassure this normally calm and friendly resident before you answer the call light. You gently touch his shoulder, lean forward, and in your best soothing voice tell him you'll be with him in a few minutes. He flinches and his hand lashes out striking you in the face knocking your glasses off. While this scenario describes an adverse behavior incident in a healthcare setting, consider how a similar behavior could occur in your work environment.

Let's consider a few possible adverse behavior triggers that may have contributed to the incident:

- Environmental – noise, light levels, and smells
- Activity – mealtime or other high-stimulation activity occurring
- Medications – changes in medication levels and/or starting new medications
- Medical status – new or changing conditions (e.g., fever, cold, infection, etc.)
- Lack of personal space – perceived threats, body posture (hands on hips), standing between the person and door, and standing directly in front of the person
- Clothing – poor-fitting or rough materials

What behaviors can you use to lessen the onset of adverse behaviors:

- Respect personal space. Keep at least an arm's length away.
- Approach from an angle. This allows the person to see you, but not easily reach you.
- Use calming nonverbal communication, including smiling and slow movements.
- Slow down. This allows the person time to properly react to your request.
- Use words that acknowledge their feelings and don't challenge them or insist they "calm down."

Discussion:

- Do you know what triggers your clients' behaviors?
- How do you attempt to de-escalate the person(s) you care for?
- What's an example of a specific incident you encountered and how did you react? Were you successful in changing the person's behavior? Would you have done anything differently?