



## CATASTROPHIC REACTIONS

*"Sometimes she gets so angry. She never used to be that way -- she was a gentle person. Now you never know what will cause her to get angry."*

### **What is a catastrophic reaction?**

According to The American Heritage® Medical Dictionary, a catastrophic reaction is defined as disorganized behavior due to a severe shock or threatening situation with which the person cannot cope.

A catastrophic reaction occurs when a situation or stimulus is perceived by the individual as stressful and overloads the person's mental ability to cope. The overload results in an exaggerated response that may present as combative behavior, screaming, making irrational accusations, or becoming very agitated or extremely emotional.

### **How can LTC staff help?**

The National Institute of Health (NIH) has identified several key actions the long term caregiver can implement in the event of a catastrophic reaction as well as some preventative measures. These actions include:

- Remove the person from the stressful situation or place. Simply the environment by reducing extra people, clutter, noise, activities.
- Keep tabs on when the catastrophic reaction occurs. Is there a pattern (e.g. time of day, type of activity, specific person) that can be identified and altered?
- Distract the person with a calming and pleasurable activity. Try soft music, a walk outside, a favorite snack.
- Try to establish and stick to a regular daily routine. Schedule the more stressful activities during times when the person is most rested. (e.g., plan baths for the morning if they tend to be tired and irritable at night.)
- Encourage daily exercise to reduce excess stress and energy.
- Do not try to reason with the person. Trying to reason with them may only make things worse. If you feel threatened, remove sharp and dangerous objects from the area and stay out of reach.
- Try to calm them with slow movements or gentle touch. Approach the person from the front and use a soothing, reassuring voice.
- Limit choices and state directions clearly. Offer activities that the person is able to do and watch for frustration levels.

### **Where Can I Get More Information?**

This handout is a brief overview on the subject of catastrophic reactions and is not intended to be a sole source of information. Some additional resources for information about catastrophic reactions include:

- The *Plan of Care* is always the best source of information for resident-specific information.
- Your facility Staff Development Nurse and Social Worker
- The NIH web-site addresses catastrophic reactions and can be accessed by visiting:

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/Alzheimers/Publications/challenging.htm#reactions>



NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

### CATASTROPHIC REACTION IN-SERVICE POST-TEST

True or False      A catastrophic reaction is defined as disorganized behavior due to a severe shock or threatening situation with which the person cannot cope.

True or False      A catastrophic reaction occurs when a situation or stimulus is perceived by the individual as stressful and overloads the person's mental ability to cope. The overload results in an exaggerated response that may present as combative behavior, screaming, making irrational accusations, or becoming very agitated or extremely emotional.

True or False      There is nothing a caregiver can do to help a person experiencing a catastrophic reaction.

True or False      Catastrophic reactions are a normal part of the aging process and not a cause for concern.

True or False      Do not try to reason with a person during a catastrophic reaction. Trying to reason with them may only make things worse.

True or False      Keeping tabs on when catastrophic reactions occur is not recommended because a catastrophic reaction can happen any time.

True or False      The resident specific plan of care is the best source for information pertaining to a particular resident.

One new thing I learned from this in-service:

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