



The message behind behaviour

There are many reasons why a person with brain injury might develop challenging behaviour. Understanding the message behind the behaviour is key to helping in a constructive and positive way.

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All behaviour serves a purpose, and so, communicates a message. Understanding this can be useful in situations that otherwise leave partners, carers and family members feeling powerless, frustrated and angry. Instead of reacting negatively to challenging behaviour it is better to look for the underlying message. This helps the person with the behaviour and empowers those who care for them.

A complex or challenging behaviour usually communicates:

- an unmet need, e.g. emotional or physical discomfort
- an expression of mood, such as sadness, anger or frustration
- a response to stimulation, whether it is too little, e.g. boredom, or too much, e.g. a noisy crowd.

Boredom - a common message

Behaviour specialists report that the most common message behind challenging behaviours is 'I'm bored'. A brain injury can result in unemployment, loss of friendships and difficulty forming new ones. Some behaviours may simply be based on the principle of 'any attention is good attention'. This can be a challenge for family members who find the caring role demanding. Often there is little time and energy left to find recreational activities for their loved one.

Other common messages behind behaviour

- there are too many demands being put on me at once
- this is an unfamiliar environment/activity and it's disturbing me
- I've got sensory overload from too much noise/light/overcrowding
- I'm tired
- I haven't got the social skills to cope with this situation.

Case study - Helen's Unfinished Sentences

Helen often screamed loudly when talking with family members. Her family thought this meant she was either in a bad mood or seeking attention. When they looked closer at Helen's behaviour they noticed that she usually screamed when someone had finished her sentence for her. Helen speaks slowly and needs extra time to say what she wants to say.

Unmet need: Helen wants to be able to express herself and resents having control of her own communication taken away.

Expression of mood: Screaming is Helen's way of expressing her frustration at being interrupted.

While this message appears obvious, it is surprisingly easy to fail to see the message behind certain behaviours. Helen needed time to gather her thoughts and express them because of her brain injury. At the same time, her family mistakenly thought they were helping by finishing her sentences.