

Sundowning / Sundowner syndrome in Persons with Dementia

Abhilash Desai MD (dr.abhilashhdesai@icloud.com)

Symptoms: Increased anxiety and restlessness in afternoons and evenings.

Management: Address the potential cause(s) – typically more than one cause. Create a “Do’s” and “Don’t” list that is individualized, strengths based. No meds have been found to be useful.

Potential cause	Intervention
Brain fatigue	Short afternoon nap
Elevated stress hormone causing severe anxiety	Relaxing / Calming activities - Lavender lotion massage three times in afternoon - Back rub / massage - Soothing music - Soothing multisensory room / Snoezelen - Going through photo album - Favorite laughter programs on TV - Watching recording of children / grandchildren - Meaningful calming activities (e.g., folding towels) - Pets / Robotic pets
Overstimulation (excessive noise, too many people, too much movements of people)	Taking the person to a quieter place with less stimulation, reduce visits by family friends in the afternoon (can visit in the morning)
Under stimulation / boredom	Walking / other exercise program in the morning and individualized meaningful and pleasant activity schedule
Insomnia	Avoid excessive daytime napping, remove meds causing insomnia, soothing nighttime rituals and other interventions to address insomnia effectively
Low lighting	Exposure to sunlight, bright light therapy, open blinds and curtains in the daytime, reduce shadows
Diet	Reduce / eliminate caffeine, excessive sugar with dramatic blood sugar fluctuations
Medication(s)	Request provider / consultant psychiatrist / pharmacist to review meds and suggest rational deprescribing
Medical condition(s)	Request provider to assess for potential reversible causes (e.g., pain, dehydration, infection, vitamin deficiencies, thyroid dysfunction, hypo/hyperglycemia)

Resource: Psychiatric Consultation in Long-term Care: A guide for healthcare professionals. Abhilash Desai and George Grossberg. 2nd Edition. Cambridge University Press. 2017. Chapter 13 – Psychosocial Spiritual Wellness Care plan for individuals with dementia.