



Challenging Behaviors as Indicators of Pain or Illness

by Brooke Ozz, M.S., BCBA, LBA

Research has shown that increased rates and intensity of self-injurious behaviors, aggression, tantrums, and property destruction in people with severe cognitive impairment may be an indication of pain/illness. (Carr, 2007) They further noted that increases in the rates of challenging behaviors on sick days as compared to non-sick days were likely a sign of pain or discomfort.

What You Can Do:

1

Be alert and know what is typical for your client/student/family member.

2

Document and report changes in behavior so that other service/care providers will be aware of changes.

3

Refer or recommend medical assessment before implementing behavior intervention strategies

4

Keep a record (e.g. Disability Distress Assessment Tool- DisDAT) of an individual's typical demeanor and behavior as well as known signs of distress. This record can help new service providers get to know the person and provide further details to medical professionals when assessing for medical problems. Available at:

<https://www.stoswaldsuk.org/how-we-help/we-educate/resources/disdat/disdat-tools.aspx>

5

“Before considering a psychiatric diagnosis, assess and address sequentially possible causes of problem behaviour, including physical (eg, infections, constipation, pain), environmental (eg, changed residence, reduced supports), and emotional factors (eg, stress, trauma, grief)” (Sullivan, 2011).

6

Use a checklist or tool (e.g. Non-Communicating Children's Pain Checklist Revised- NCCPC-R) to assess behavioral signs. Available at: **http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/Shared/PDFs/AKH_Breau_everyday.pdf**

7

Be patient and be compassionate. The people we serve with developmental disabilities are faced with innumerable challenges on a daily basis. Taking the time to assess for a medical component when exploring the cause of challenging behavior could be the key to preventing long-term pain or discomfort.

For more resources, check out our Best Practice Blog at
www.CAHumanServices.org