

Paranoid Thoughts in Dementia: A Guide for Patients & Families

Paranoid thoughts are common in people living with dementia. A person may believe others are stealing from them, harming them, or acting against them. These beliefs are very real to the individual and can cause distress for both the patient and caregivers. Understanding why this happens and how to respond can reduce conflict and improve care.

Common Examples of Paranoid Thoughts

- “Someone is stealing my money or belongings”
- “You are trying to harm me”
- “There are strangers in the house”
- Accusing caregivers or family members of wrongdoing
- Misplacing items and blaming others

Why Paranoia Happens in Dementia

- Memory loss leading to misinterpretation of events
- Difficulty recognizing people or surroundings
- Brain changes affecting judgment and perception
- Anxiety, fear, or loss of control
- Sensory impairment (vision/hearing)
- Medication effects or medical illness

How to Respond: Core Principles

- Do NOT argue or try to prove them wrong
- Acknowledge feelings, not the belief
- Stay calm and non-defensive
- Offer reassurance and safety
- Redirect attention when possible

What to Say (Helpful Scripts)

- “That sounds really upsetting. I’m here with you.”
- “I can see you’re worried. Let’s figure this out together.”
- “You’re safe. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”
- “Let’s look for your item together.”

What NOT to Say

- “That’s not true”
- “You’re imagining things”
- “Stop saying that”
- “You’re wrong”

These responses often increase fear and defensiveness.

If They Accuse You Directly

Example response:

“I’m really sorry this feels upsetting. I would never take anything from you. Let’s work together to figure this out.”

If They Become Angry or Escalated

- Stay calm and lower your voice
- Give space if needed
- Avoid confrontation

Example:

“I can see this is really upsetting. Let’s take a moment and sit together.”

Practical Strategies That Help

- Keep important items in consistent locations
- Use duplicates of commonly lost items
- Maintain routines
- Reduce clutter and confusion
- Ensure proper lighting
- Address hearing or vision issues

When to Seek Medical Help

- Sudden onset of paranoia
- Rapid worsening of symptoms
- Aggression or safety concerns
- Possible delirium or medical cause
- Medication side effects

Tips for Caregivers

- Do not take accusations personally
- Recognize this is caused by brain changes
- Seek support if stress becomes overwhelming
- Maintain your own emotional well-being

Final Notes

- Paranoia in dementia is common and distressing but manageable.
- Validation, reassurance, and redirection are key strategies.
- Caregivers play a critical role in maintaining safety and emotional stability.