

## 2.5 Managing Symptoms of PSP: **Changes in Personality, Mood, Thinking and Behaviour**

*This Help Sheet gives an outline of some of the problems people with Progressive Supranuclear Palsy (PSP) may experience in relation to personality, mood, thinking and behaviour, along with some suggestions for managing or treating these symptoms if they occur. The information here is presented as a guide; it is important to discuss all symptoms with your neurologist and other health professionals.*

PSP is a rare neurological condition affecting the parts of the brain that control walking, eye movements, balance, speech and swallowing. PSP has a wide range of symptoms, but few people experience them all and symptoms vary from person to person. It is a progressive condition, meaning that the symptoms tend to worsen over time. However, the severity and rate of symptom progression varies widely in different people.

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PSP produces chemical changes in the brain, which can cause a range of changes in personality, mood, thinking and behaviour. Not all people with PSP experience these changes and symptoms may range from subtle to severe. Some symptoms may stop as suddenly as they began. All changes should be discussed with your neurologist and team of health professionals. Some of these changes may be due to a treatable underlying illness or as side-effects of some medication.

It is also important to avoid mistaking the physical changes for personality changes in people with PSP. For example, people may be unable to make facial expressions such as smiling due to lack of muscle control and voice changes may result in a voice that sounds angry or aggressive.

The most important factor in managing personality and behaviour symptoms is to understand that the changes are due to the illness and are beyond the control of the person.



*For PSP information and support phone  
Parkinson's Australia on 1800 644 189*





## **Coping with changes in personality, mood, thinking and/or behaviour**

Coping with these changes can be difficult for everyone concerned; carers, who are often partners or close family members, can find it particularly difficult. Some describe it as "like living with a stranger". Some may even bear the brunt of the person's anger or frustration. It is very important for carers to seek help and to maintain their own safety and wellbeing. Getting advice, sharing concerns and taking a short break from time to time are just some of the things carers do to help them cope. Further information is available in our Caring for Carers Help Sheet.

## **Thinking problems**

People with PSP may experience problems with their thinking, particularly slowness of thought and difficulty in organising thoughts and ideas. It may also be difficult for them to do more than one thing at a time. However, PSP rarely causes memory problems.

People with PSP usually remain mentally aware of themselves and of their environment. It is important to continue to include people with PSP in conversations and normal family life. As the condition progresses, people with PSP may give the impression that they are not thinking normally because their communication and responses to questions may be slow. This can lead to some people being misdiagnosed as having dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease.

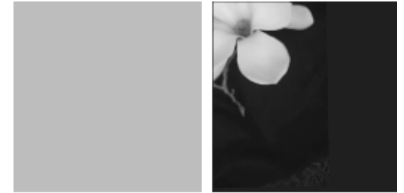
Slowness of thought can make conversation difficult. For example, it may take several minutes for a person with this symptom to give an answer to a question. It is important to remember that people with PSP can understand and respond, but that this will take some time. Allowing time for a slowed response will help to maintain communication and reduce frustration.

Medications used to slow the progression of other progressive brain conditions, such as Alzheimer's disease, have been found to have no benefit for people with PSP.

## **Lack of interest or withdrawal**

Some people with PSP may become withdrawn or apathetic and seem to no longer have an interest in activities they previously enjoyed, such as outings, holidays and get-togethers with family and friends. Where possible it is important to maintain activities. It is also very important for carers to have the opportunity to maintain the activities they have always enjoyed.

Symptoms such as loss of ability to control the muscles of the face and problems maintaining eye contact can sometimes be mistaken for



lack of interest.

### **Irritability, frustration and/or aggression**

Some people with PSP may become demanding, impatient and in some cases aggressive – either verbally or physically or both. This can be caused by frustration due to the limitations PSP brings to activity and communication. Maintaining as much independence as possible can help to manage this. This can also be due to the chemical changes in the brain.

The most important aspect of managing these symptoms is to make sure that everyone concerned remains safe. The wellbeing of carers and family members is just as important as the wellbeing of the person with PSP. Some of these behavioural changes can be managed with medication and your neurologist is the best person to manage this.

### **Irresponsibility or lack of understanding**

Brain changes in PSP are thought to cause problems such as lack of understanding or insight, which may appear as irresponsible or reckless behaviour, or as some carers see it, selfishness. For example, carers of people with PSP commonly complain that the person will attempt tasks that are beyond their physical capability - such as driving a vehicle despite having vision problems and slow reaction times, thus placing themselves and others in danger. Understanding that it is the condition not the person may help.

### **Mood swings**

Some people with PSP may become more emotional. For example, they may laugh or cry inappropriately. Behavioural techniques such as withdrawal or giving someone quiet times are often effective as this behaviour may escalate in the presence of others. Some medications are also available to manage this symptom and you should discuss this with your neurologist.

### **Depression**

Depression is a common symptom of PSP. It is likely that depression in PSP is caused by a combination of chemical changes in the brain and a reaction to the changes and challenges PSP brings. Depression can

seriously affect a person's ability to manage living with PSP, so it is important to avoid depression by managing symptoms and maintaining as much independence as possible.

Medications are available to treat depression. These medications have the added benefit of improving some of the physical symptoms of PSP such as movement problems and difficulties with speech.

### **Obsessive or repetitive behaviour**

A small number of people with PSP may be affected by an inability to 'switch off' an action, resulting in repetitive movements or actions. These may include repetitive plucking at clothes or repeatedly saying the same word. Sometimes distraction or a change of topic may stop this behaviour.

**Remember: The most important factor in managing personality and behaviour symptoms is to understand that the changes are due to the illness and are beyond the control of the person.**



For further information about living with PSP, including the full range of PSP Australia Help Sheets, visit: [www.psp-australia.org.au](http://www.psp-australia.org.au)

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