

3 Ways to Respond When Someone with Alzheimer's Says I Want to Go Home

When someone with Alzheimer's says I want to go home

Hearing seniors say "I want to go home" over and over again is something Alzheimer's and dementia caregivers often deal with. It's especially frustrating to hear this when they're **already** home.

The big question is how to respond in a way that reduces their agitation or anxiety and helps them let go of the idea. Before you answer, take a deep breath and do your best to **not** take what they're saying personally. This lets you respond more calmly and kindly, which also helps them calm down.

3 ways to respond to "I want to go home"

Use these three methods to respond when you hear "I want to go home." Soothing responses help you avoid big fights.

These suggestions will put you on the right track, but be prepared to get creative. Not everything you try will work the first time. And even if something works once, it might not work every time. Don't get discouraged! This gets easier with practice.

1. Reassure and comfort

Approach your older adult with a calm, soothing, and relaxed manner. They'll pick up on your body language and tone of voice and will subconsciously start to match you. If you're calm, they'll get calmer too.

Sometimes saying "I want to go home" is how your senior tells you they're tense, anxious, or scared and need extra comfort. If they like hugs, this is a good time for one. Others may prefer gentle touching or stroking on their arm or shoulder or simply having you sit with them for a bit.

Another way of giving extra comfort and reassurance is to give them a soft blanket or stuffed animal to cuddle.

2. Avoid reasoning or explanations

Don't try to explain that they're in their own home, assisted living is now their home, or they voluntarily moved in with you 3 years ago.

Using reason and logic with someone who has a brain disease will only make them more insistent, agitated, and distressed. They won't be able to process that information and will only sense that you're preventing them from doing something they feel strongly about.

3. Agree, then redirect and distract

This is a challenging technique, so don't get too discouraged if the first few attempts don't work perfectly. Being able to redirect and distract is a skill that improves with practice.

First, agree

Agree by saying something like "Ok, we'll go soon." or "That's a good idea. We'll go as soon as I clean up these dishes."

Then, redirect and distract

After agreeing, subtly redirect their attention. This redirection should lead into a pleasant and distracting activity that takes their mind away from wanting to go home.

For example, you could gently take their elbow while saying "Ok, we'll go soon" and walk down the hall together to a big window or to the kitchen. Point out some of the beautiful birds and flowers outside or offer a favorite snack or drink. Later, casually shift to another activity that's part of their regular daily routine.

Another example is to say "Ok, let's first get your sweater so you won't be cold when we go outside." Then, while you're both walking to supposedly get the sweater, chat about something pleasant, stop for a cup of tea, or get involved in an activity they enjoy.

Or, simply ask them to tell you about their home. After a while, guide the conversation to a neutral topic. Asking about their home validates their feelings, encourages them to share positive memories, and distracts them from their original goal of going home.

Open questions that encourage them to share their thoughts work well. For example:

- Your home sounds lovely, tell me more about it.
- What's the first thing you like to do when you get home?
- What's the best thing about going home?

If nothing is working...

Sometimes, your older adult will be stubborn and refuse to let go of the idea of going home no matter how much you try to soothe or redirect.

If that happens, one option is to take them on a brief car ride. Experiment with how far and how long you need to drive before you can return to where they live without protest. You could also make a stop at the ice cream parlor for a nice (distracting) treat or another place they enjoy visiting. If it's the middle of the night and you can't get them to forget about "home" and go back to sleep, it might be worth the effort to take a quick drive around the neighborhood.

Even if it's not possible to actually take them out or even get them into the car, going through the actions of getting ready to leave can still be soothing. It shows that you believe them and are helping to achieve their goal. Meanwhile, the activities of getting ready give you more chances to redirect to something else.

Bottom line

"I want to go home" is often a request for comfort rather than asking to go somewhere. In your response, the goal is to reduce your older adult's anxiety and fear so they can let go of the idea.

This terrible disease forces seniors to live in their brain's version of reality. The best thing you can do is step into that reality, focus on comfort and reassurance, and respond to the emotions behind their request.

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