

Why Waiting and “Getting Ready” Are So Hard in Dementia

When time stops making sense

What caregivers notice

Distress shows up when nothing seems urgent.

Waiting for an appointment, getting dressed, leaving the house, or being told “just a minute” can trigger anxiety, resistance or agitation.

This is often misread as impatience or refusal. It is not.

What waiting asks the brain to do

Waiting depends on the brain’s ability to:

- Understand time passing
- Predict what will happen next
- Trust that something will occur later
- Hold that information without action

Dementia gradually disrupts these abilities.

When time can no longer be tracked internally, waiting does not feel neutral. It can feel endless or unsafe.

“Soon” or “later” lose meaning when the brain cannot measure or trust time.

Why getting ready is especially hard

Getting ready requires a series of small shifts:

- Stop what you’re doing
- Change focus
- Tolerate uncertainty
- Begin something new

Clinicians often call these moments *transitions*.

Each shift adds cognitive demand. In dementia, that demand quickly overwhelms remaining capacity. Distress may appear suddenly, but it reflects neurological strain, not a choice.

A different way to understand what’s happening

Difficulty with waiting and getting ready is not about cooperation.

It is about a brain that can no longer hold “what comes next” long enough to feel safe.

When time collapses, distress fills the gap.

*Understanding how dementia changes the brain series, adapted from **Becoming a Brain Interpreter***

This resource supports understanding and communication and does not replace clinical judgment