

# Understanding Causes of Challenging Behaviors

A *challenging behavior* is any behavior that is harmful physically or emotionally. It can be harmful to the person doing it or to someone else. Examples of challenging behaviors include a depressed person withdrawing from other people, an agitated person shouting repeatedly or hitting someone, or a confused individual wandering and getting lost.

Causes of challenging behaviors include internal and external factors that combine to trigger or reinforce a behavior.

**Sample internal  
triggers or reinforcers**

- Emotion (e.g., despair, anxiety, fear)
- Medication
- Illness (physical or mental)
- Confusion
- Pain or discomfort
- Lifelong perceptions

**Sample external  
triggers or reinforcers**

- Lack of meaningful activity
- Unpleasant events
- Unpleasant actions of others
- Demands of others
- Light that is too bright or too dim
- Too much noise
- Being misunderstood by others

**Remember:** Every challenging behavior is likely to have both internal and external causes.