

# Behaviour described as challenging

**Behaviour described as challenging is not a medical condition or a diagnosis. It is a form of communication to express an unmet need. Everyone involved in your relative's life should be aware of their likes, dislikes, wishes, feelings values and beliefs. Your relative should have an alternative way of communicating their needs and everybody in their life should listen and respond positively to their communication.**

## Key message:

Knowing your relative's happiness triggers is just as, if not more, important than knowing their distressed triggers.



It is not hard to explain this man's challenging behaviour – give him a decent service, treat him like a human being and try to serve him rather than process him and his challenging behaviour would disappear (McGill, 1993)

## The Mental Health Act and behaviour described as challenging

Currently, if your relative has a learning disability, autism or both they can be detained (sectioned) because of behaviour described as challenging. The Mental Health Act is in the process of being amended. If the proposed changes are approved it will mean that being detained (sectioned) due to behaviour described as challenging will not be legal without a formal mental health diagnosis, e.g. depression, psychosis.

## Formal definitions of behaviour described as challenging

Two of the most widely used definitions of 'challenging behaviour' are:

- "Culturally abnormal behaviour(s) of such an intensity, frequency or duration that the physical safety of the person or others is likely to be placed in serious jeopardy, or behaviour which is likely to seriously limit use of, or result in the person being denied access to, ordinary community facilities.

Source: Emerson, E (1995), cited in Emerson, E (2001, 2nd edition): Challenging Behaviour: Analysis and intervention in people with learning disabilities. Cambridge University Press

- "Behaviour can be described as challenging when it is of such an intensity, frequency, or duration as to threaten the quality of life and/or the physical safety of the individual or others and it is likely to lead to responses that are restrictive, aversive or result in exclusion."

Source: Royal College of Psychiatrists, British Psychological Society, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, (2007), Challenging behaviour – a unified approach.

### Terminology

Throughout this resource behaviour described as challenging is used because it has a formal and clear definition.

**Read this information from the Challenging Behaviour Foundation (CBF) to see how the language describing challenging behaviour has changed over time and how the term 'challenging behaviour' can be misused:**

[Click here to read more](#)



[Click here to read more](#)



There is no medication or treatment to 'cure' challenging behaviour, instead the focus should be "what is the message?".

Usually the message falls into one or more of these 5 areas:

- **P – Pain.** Your relative may be in pain and is unable to communicate this or nobody is listening.
- **A – Attention/Social Interaction.** Your relative may be feeling lonely, bored, need some reassurance or just want some social interaction. Even if the attention given is negative, it is still attention and welcomed as an alternative to being left alone.
- **S – Sensory/Self Fulfilling.** Your relative may be using a sensory or self-fulfilling behaviour due to over/under stimulation or to self soothe (e.g. rocking, spinning an object).
- **T – Tangible.** Your relative may use behaviour described as challenging to get something, e.g. a drink, something to eat, a favourite person.
- **A – Avoidance/Escape.** Your relative may display behaviour described as challenging to avoid something, for example if they are asked to do something or go somewhere they don't want to or an unpleasant feeling such as anxiety.
- Use the acronym PASTA to remember.

**Identifying the underlying cause is called functional analysis. This information from the CBF explains how functional analysis is used. Watch the video clips featuring family carers providing examples of how they used functional analysis to understand their relative's messages, including teaching new skills and other more acceptable ways of communicating:**



[Click here to see more on the CBF's website](#)

**"All behaviour happens for a reason and challenging behaviour is no different." Watch this animation from BILD:**



[Click here to watch the animation](#)

The British Institute for Learning Disabilities (BILD) has several resources explaining why behaviour described as challenging happens, including:

1. 10 things you can do for someone who has behaviour described as challenging
2. Active support
3. How to communicate effectively
4. Building a good rapport (positive interactions/relationship)
5. The impact of the environment
6. Good physical health



[There is a video clip and a summary sheet for each topic](#)

## Family Carer Advocacy Resource

Use [this link](#) to read what NICE guidelines say should happen if your relative displays behaviour described as challenging to communicate an unmet need, including:

- Working in partnership (your relative, you (family carer), health and social care professionals)
- Ensuring that everyone involved in your relative's care and support and/or treatment has the appropriate skills and knowledge related to behaviour described as challenging
- Delivering and organising effective care
- Support and interventions for family carers
- [Early intervention](#): recognising personal ([severe learning disability](#), [communication difficulties](#)) and environment factors (sensory integration needs) which may contribute to the development of behaviour described as challenging
- Functional assessment of behaviours
- Types of interventions: psychological, speech and language to improve communication, change in housing to improve environment, e.g. from a group home to sole occupancy

**Read this CQC information sheet which describes how they check that services are providing the right care, support and/or treatment if your relative displays behaviour described as challenging as a form of communication:**

[Click here to read the information sheet](#)



**Read SCIE's at a glance briefing: Challenging behaviour: a guide for family carers on getting the right support for adults:**

[Click here to read the briefing](#)



## Reducing the causes of behaviour described as challenging

The response to behaviour described as challenging should never be restrictive interventions e.g. restraint, inappropriate medication, seclusion, long-term segregation or blanket restrictions, instead the focus should be on providing your relative with a good quality of life. Research shows that when people experience a good quality of life, behaviour described as challenging reduces.

## What are the components of a good quality life

There are many models of what a good quality of life looks like for people with a learning disability, autism or both and includes:

- Choice and control
- A community presence
- [Total communication environment](#)
- Good emotional and mental health
- [Active support](#)
- A recognition that all behaviour happens for a reason and understanding the reason is key (functional analysis)
- Being supported to take positive risks
- Trauma informed care
- [Capable environment](#)



[Read this Quality of Life Standards and Toolkit](#)

**This information is about how CQC measures quality of life as part of their inspection process:**



[Click here to read more](#)

## Family Carer Advocacy Resource

**Read this set of 6 guides 'Meeting the Challenge'. Guide 2 describes 'What does good support look like for adults with learning disabilities who display challenging behaviour?':**

[Click here to read the guides](#)



The CBF is the only charity which provides information, support and training for family carers of relatives (children, young people and adults) with a severe learning disability and behaviour described as challenging. In addition, by listening to the experiences of family carers and their relatives, the CBF highlights their needs and promotes high quality support.

**Visit the CBF website for further information and resources:**

[Click here for the CBF website](#)

