



Parkinson's Hallucinations and Delusions

What Professional Caregivers Should Do

A Training Guide for Professional Caregivers Supporting Individuals Living with Parkinson's

Hallucinations and delusions can occur in individuals living with Parkinson's disease, particularly as the condition progresses or when certain medications are used to treat symptoms.

These experiences can be confusing or frightening for residents and challenging for professional caregivers to manage. Understanding why they occur and how to respond appropriately can help maintain safety, dignity, and emotional well-being.

Understanding Hallucinations in Parkinson's

A **hallucination** occurs when a person sees, hears, or senses something that is not actually present.

In Parkinson's disease, hallucinations are usually **visual**, meaning the person may see things that others do not see.

Common examples include:

- Seeing people or animals in the room
- Seeing shadows or movement that is not present
- Seeing objects that disappear when looked at closely
- Feeling as if someone is nearby

Some individuals recognize that what they are seeing is not real. Others may believe the experience is real.

Hallucinations may occur occasionally or become more frequent over time.

Understanding Delusions

A **delusion** is a strongly held belief that is not based in reality.

Examples may include:

- Believing someone is stealing personal belongings
- Believing a spouse or family member is unfaithful
- Believing strangers are entering the room or residence

Delusions can be distressing and may lead to anxiety, suspicion, or agitation.

Why Hallucinations and Delusions Occur

Several factors may contribute to hallucinations and delusions in Parkinson's disease:

- Progression of Parkinson's disease
- Parkinson's medications
- Cognitive changes or dementia
- Infection or illness
- Dehydration
- Sleep disruption
- Changes in environment or lighting

Multiple factors may occur at the same time.

Early Warning Signs Professional Caregivers May Notice

Professional caregivers may observe changes before hallucinations or delusions become obvious.

Possible early signs include:

- Increased confusion
- Talking to people who are not present
- Looking or pointing toward empty areas of the room
- Increased suspicion or mistrust
- Sleep disturbances
- Increased anxiety or agitation

Early recognition allows caregivers to communicate concerns to the healthcare team.

How Professional Caregivers Should Respond

The way caregivers respond can greatly influence how the person experiencing hallucinations or delusions feels.

Remain Calm and Reassuring

Approach the person with a calm tone and relaxed body language. Anxiety from caregivers may increase distress.

Do Not Argue or Confront

Avoid trying to convince the person that what they are seeing or believing is not real. Arguing may increase frustration or agitation.

Acknowledge the Person's Feelings

Instead of challenging the belief, respond to the emotion behind it.

Examples:

- “That sounds upsetting. I’m here with you.”
- “You’re safe here.”

Redirect Attention

Gently redirect the person’s focus to another activity, conversation, or environment.

Ensure Safety

If the person appears frightened or agitated, ensure the environment is safe and remove potential hazards.

Environmental Strategies That May Help

Simple adjustments may reduce hallucination triggers.

Helpful strategies include:

- Ensuring good lighting, especially in the evening
- Reducing shadows in rooms and hallways
- Keeping living areas familiar and uncluttered
- Maintaining consistent daily routines
- Ensuring glasses and hearing aids are used when needed

These steps may reduce visual misinterpretations.

When to Notify the Healthcare Team

Professional caregivers should report:

- New hallucinations or delusions
- Sudden worsening of symptoms
- Hallucinations that cause distress or agitation
- Behavioral changes affecting safety
- Changes following medication adjustments

These symptoms may indicate medication changes, infection, dehydration, or other medical concerns.

Important Reminder for Professional Caregivers

Hallucinations and delusions are **symptoms of Parkinson's disease and related conditions**, not intentional behavior.

Individuals experiencing these symptoms are often frightened or confused.

A patient, calm, and respectful approach helps protect the person's dignity and emotional well-being.

Supporting Individuals Living With Parkinson's

Professional caregivers play an important role in supporting individuals who experience hallucinations or delusions.

Helpful practices include:

- Maintaining calm communication
- Avoiding confrontation
- Providing reassurance
- Monitoring for behavioral changes
- Communicating concerns promptly

With appropriate care and medical evaluation, these symptoms can often be managed.

Wisconsin Parkinson Association

The **Wisconsin Parkinson Association (WPA)** provides education, resources, and training materials for professional caregivers and healthcare professionals supporting individuals living with Parkinson's.

To learn more about Parkinson's care resources and education, visit:

wiparkinson.org

© Wisconsin Parkinson Association – Health Professionals Resource Series