

When Evening Feels Like a Threat: Understanding Sundowning in Dementia



Sundowning can be a distressing experience that families face in dementia care, not because it lasts all day, but because it arrives with such force at a time when everyone is already running on empty. For many carers, the evening is meant to be the moment the day finally slows down — yet for a person living with dementia, evening can feel like the moment everything becomes unstable. Anxiety rises, restlessness increases, frustration escalates, and behaviours may appear “out of nowhere”. But sundowning is not random, it is the brain responding to change, fatigue, shifting perception, and unmet needs — often all at once.

As the day moves toward evening, the dementia brain has fewer cognitive resources left to keep itself organised. The ability to filter noise, interpret surroundings, and regulate emotions becomes weaker. What the person could “cope with” earlier in the day may suddenly become overwhelming. Light changes, shadows deepen, background sounds feel sharper, and the environment can start to feel unfamiliar. When the brain struggles to make sense of what it sees and hears, the body responds with stress — and stress will always search for an outlet. This is why sundowning often looks like pacing, repetitive questioning, agitation, clinginess, refusal, tearfulness, or sudden anger. These are not personality changes. They are distress signals.

For some people, sundowning isn’t only about tiredness or low light — it can also be about the brain responding to *time itself*. Evening is not just “evening”. It is a deeply programmed part of life history. For decades, this time of day meant something. It may have been the time a husband came home from work. The time dinner started. The time children were collected. The time the home was prepared. The time a person’s role and identity came alive: cooking, organising, planning, protecting, providing. Dementia may remove the ability to carry out those routines, but it does not always remove the emotional pull of them. The internal clock still says, **“something is supposed to happen now.”** And when the brain cannot complete what it expects, the person may experience a rising sense of tension they cannot explain.

This is why sundowning can sometimes look like someone “waiting” rather than wandering — standing by the door, staring out of a window, repeatedly asking where someone is, insisting they need to go home, or becoming upset because something feels unfinished. In many cases, they are not confused in the way we assume. They are responding to a familiar emotional expectation that the brain cannot complete anymore. The routine is still inside them, but the ability to fulfil it has been removed. That mismatch can trigger anxiety, frustration, and grief — even if the person cannot name those feelings.

This is also why arguing rarely works. You cannot reason a dementia brain out of a stress response, because sundowning is not driven by logic — it's driven by an overwhelmed system. The more we correct, force, or confront, the more the person feels unsafe, and the more the behaviour escalates. Even well-intended explanations can sound like pressure when the brain is already tired. What helps most is not more information, but **more safety** — emotional safety, environmental safety, and relational safety.

The most effective way to support sundowning is to begin **reducing stress before it builds**. The evening does not start when the sun goes down — it often begins earlier in the afternoon. This is the time to gently lower stimulation, reduce demands, and avoid stacking too many tasks close together. If the day has been filled with appointments, visitors, noise, decision-making, or constant activity, sundowning may arrive harder because the brain has had no chance to recover. Keeping late afternoons simpler, calmer, and more predictable helps the nervous system stay regulated long enough for the evening transition to feel less threatening.

Because this time of day can be strongly connected to life routine, one of the most powerful strategies is to replace the missing routine with a **safe version** of it. Not by creating strict structure, but by giving the brain something familiar to hold onto. That can look like setting the table together, folding towels, sorting a small basket of items, doing a gentle “evening check” of the home, or preparing a warm drink in the same way they always used to. These actions do more than fill time — they restore identity. They tell the brain, **“we are still in a rhythm”**, even if the original routine is no longer possible.

Even small sensory adjustments can make a major difference. As light changes, keeping the environment well-lit (without harsh glare) reduces shadow confusion. Keeping background noise low helps the brain filter sounds more easily. Choosing familiar music, familiar scents, and familiar objects supports grounding when the brain begins to drift into uncertainty. You are not trying to “calm them down” as if they are the problem — you are trying to lower the load on a brain that is already working too hard to hold reality together.

And when sundowning does happen, the focus becomes simple: **reduce pressure, hold steady, and communicate safety**. Speak less, slow down, soften your tone, and respond to the feeling rather than the words. If someone says, “I need to go home,” the most helpful response is rarely, “You are home.” Instead it may be, “Something doesn't feel right, does it?” or “You feel like you need to get somewhere safe.” That moment of validation can reduce the emotional fight instantly, because the person feels seen rather than corrected.

Sundowning is not a sign of failure. It is a sign that the dementia brain needs a different kind of support at a different time of day. When families learn to recognise the patterns beneath the behaviour — tiredness, overstimulation, changing light, emotional memory, routine expectation, and identity disruption — sundowning becomes less frightening. Not because it disappears overnight, but because it becomes understandable, predictable, and manageable. And when you understand what the behaviour is really saying, you stop fighting the behaviour and start supporting the brain.

If you want more practical strategies like this, Launex teaches families how to recognise triggers early, reduce distress before it builds, and protect dignity through simple real-world

adjustments that actually work. You can explore our Dementia Torches and Family Pathway support here: <https://launexltd.com/resources>