

## When television becomes real: why the dementia brain crosses the boundary



A distressing moment for families is when a person living with dementia reacts to television as if it is happening in real life. A man watching Baywatch may believe the water is just outside the house, that young men on screen are threatening, or that he needs to go outside to intervene or fight. To the family, this looks like confusion or loss of insight. To the brain, something very different is happening.

In the healthy brain, the ability to recognise television as fictional relies on higher-order processing. The thinking brain continuously labels images as symbolic, places them in context, and separates “representation” from “reality.” This function depends heavily on the frontal and temporal networks — areas that are particularly vulnerable in dementia. As these networks weaken, the brain loses its ability to apply abstraction and perspective.

On the Launex Dementia Brain Map™, this is a **collapse of the symbolic filter**. The thinking brain no longer reliably interprets what is being seen. When that happens, the brain does not pause to analyse — it reroutes. Visual input is passed directly to the emotional and instinctive systems. The image is no longer processed as “a programme on a screen,” but as an immediate experience requiring response.

This is where the **Three Brain connection** becomes critical. The emotional brain responds first: fear, urgency, protectiveness, or anger are triggered instantly. The gut brain then prepares the body for action. By the time the thinking brain tries to catch up, it no longer has authority. The emotional override is already in place, and the behaviour follows.

From the inside, the experience feels completely real. The water is not symbolic. The threat is not imagined. The need to act is not a choice. This is why reasoning, correcting, or explaining that “it’s only TV” so often escalates the situation. Those responses demand cognitive processing from a system that is no longer in control. To the emotional brain, this feels like being ignored or restrained in the face of danger.

Understanding this shifts the response entirely. The goal is not to re-establish logic — that pathway is unreliable — but to **reduce emotional load and sensory threat**. Changing the channel, turning off the television will only produce confrontation and escalate behavioural responses.

Once the emotional brain has taken hold, the priority is no longer to remove the stimulus, but to **stay inside the person's experienced reality without reinforcing it**. Abruptly turning off the television or changing the channel can feel intrusive or threatening, because it removes meaning from a situation the brain is actively responding to. At this stage, the nervous system is already engaged, and attempts to control the environment can escalate distress rather than reduce it.

What supports regulation instead is **co-presence** — staying alongside the person, matching their emotional tone without amplifying it, and allowing the intensity to settle before any environmental changes are introduced. When the emotional system feels seen rather than overridden, the brain is far more likely to release its grip naturally. Only then does it become possible to gently shift attention or reduce stimulation without triggering a defensive response.

When families view this behaviour through the Launex Dementia Brain Map™, guilt often lifts. The person is not being dramatic, aggressive, or difficult. The brain has lost its ability to separate representation from reality, and the emotional systems are doing exactly what they were designed to do: protect.

This is why dementia care cannot rely on logic-based responses alone. Once the thinking brain steps back, behaviour is no longer driven by understanding — it is driven by survival. Seeing that moment clearly is what allows families to respond with confidence instead of conflict.