

## Why taking control escalates behaviour — even when your intention is to help



One of the most common moments of regret families describe is the point where they stepped in to “stop something” and unknowingly made the situation worse. The intention is almost always protective. A partner wants to prevent distress, danger, or escalation. Yet instead of calming the situation, their action triggers anger, resistance, or even aggression. This does not happen because they handled it badly. It happens because the brain they are interacting with no longer responds to control in the way it once did.

In dementia, behaviour is no longer governed primarily by the thinking brain. The systems responsible for reasoning, perspective-taking, and impulse regulation weaken early in many dementias. When this happens, control does not disappear from the brain — it **moves**. Authority shifts away from logic and into the emotional and instinctive systems. On the Launex Dementia Brain Map, this is the point where emotional override becomes dominant.

Once emotional override is active, the brain is no longer evaluating actions based on reason or outcome. It is assessing **threat, safety, and autonomy**. Any external attempt to take charge of the situation — switching something off, stopping a movement, correcting a belief, overriding a decision — is processed through this lens. Even when done gently, it can be experienced as interference, dismissal, or restraint.

This is why attempts to take control often escalate behaviour rather than contain it. From the outside, the action looks helpful. From the inside, the emotional brain experiences it as loss of agency. The instinctive brain then steps in to defend. What follows is not “challenging behaviour,” but a **protective response**.

This dynamic becomes especially clear in situations involving strong emotional meaning, such as television content that feels real, a belief that something urgent is happening, or a routine that feels necessary. In these moments, the person is already operating from emotional truth rather than cognitive interpretation. Removing the stimulus or asserting authority does not

remove the emotional charge; it strips away the structure that the brain was using to make sense of the moment.

The Three Brain connection explains why this matters so deeply. The thinking brain may recognise an action as sensible, but it no longer holds leadership. The emotional brain decides whether something feels safe or threatening, and the instinctive brain decides whether to comply, resist, or defend. When control is imposed from the outside, the instinctive brain often reacts before the thinking brain has any chance to engage.

This is why well-intentioned strategies such as redirection, correction, or firm reassurance can backfire. They rely on cooperation from systems that are no longer in charge. The result is often confusion layered with frustration, followed by anger that appears sudden or disproportionate. In reality, the escalation began at the moment autonomy was removed.

A person-led response works differently. Instead of attempting to regain control of the situation, it focuses on **regulation**. Staying alongside the person, matching emotional tone without amplifying it, and allowing intensity to settle before any change is introduced supports the emotional brain in releasing its hold naturally. When the nervous system feels seen rather than overridden, the need to defend reduces.

Only once the emotional system settles can the environment shift safely. Control is not seized; it is gently relinquished by the brain itself. This distinction is subtle but critical. Behaviour does not calm because it was managed, but because the brain no longer feels under threat.

Understanding this changes everything for families. It reframes moments of escalation not as failures of care, but as signals that the brain has crossed into a state where control is no longer the appropriate tool. It explains why “doing the right thing” can sometimes produce the wrong outcome — and why compassion, patience, and presence are not passive responses, but neurologically informed ones.

Taking control feels intuitive when we are frightened or trying to protect someone we love. But in dementia, safety is not created by authority. It is created by **preserving agency at the point where the brain is most vulnerable to losing it**.

That is not permissiveness. It is precision. It is where behaviour becomes a language.

This is one of the core interpretations we teach in Phases 5–7 of Dementia Care & Understanding: A Family Pathway Course — translating brain-change into real-life moments.

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