Distressed Behaviour as Communication
by Kathy Laurenhue, M.A.

Introduction to behaviour as communication

When we refer to 'behaviours' in terms of care provision, we are almost always talking about people with dementia, and we almost always mean something negative related to why a person refuses to see things our way. If you think about that sentence, we are the ones being illogical and stubborn – expecting someone with brain damage to behave as if they don't have a condition beyond their control.

> Let's begin with an attitude adjustment:
> Not: The person **IS** a problem;
> Rather: The person **HAS** a problem.

A word about dementia
Dementia is the progressive loss of memory, thinking skills, judgement, and verbal communication skills. It is a symptom in dozens of diseases, but the most common form is Alzheimer's disease. Related to these are vascular dementia (or multi-infarct dementia) caused by small strokes and Lewy Body disease. Many people also have a combination of these. We have used the term 'dementia' in a general way throughout this course rather than distinguishing between the many forms, because it is more important to understand the unique individual who has dementia than to understand the form of dementia the person has.

A word about older adults *without* dementia
Although this course is aimed primarily at understanding behaviours in people with dementia, you may find that the guidelines work for people *without* cognitive impairments as well. We all want to be understood, but we don't always want to explain ourselves. We are all stubborn and resistant to logic about *something*, usually something related to our fears, and with older adults, often a fear of losing a level of independence. Pay attention to the ideas that follow, keeping in mind specific people you care for and see how broadly you can apply the lessons.

Part 1: General guidelines

Understand the message

- **Behaviour is a form of communication**. It is never meaningless, even when we don't understand the message.