

Why They Refuse to Shower Checklist

Purpose of This Checklist

Shower refusals almost never come from stubbornness. They come from a reason you can't see yet. Work down this list in order — you'll find the reason before you say a word, and you'll stop trying the right approach on the wrong problem.

Start With You

Before you look at them, look at what you're bringing into the bathroom. These are the habits that quietly feed a refusal. Check any that sound like you — not to feel bad, but because these are the fastest things to change.

- ☐ I'm using a lot of words. (Words are the first thing dementia takes.)
- ☐ I'm giving all the steps at once — "get undressed, get in, wash your hair."
- ☐ I'm asking "do you want to take a shower?" The answer to that is always no.
- ☐ I'm trying to convince them of something they don't believe — that they smell, that it's been a week.
- ☐ I'm repeating myself louder and faster when they don't move.
- ☐ I'm insisting on my way: every day, in the tub, head to toe.
- ☐ I'm asking again the second they say no, instead of walking away and coming back.
- ☐ I'm doing it at a different time, in a different order, with whoever is available.

If you checked even two of these, start there. Changing what you do is faster than changing what they do — and it's the only half of this you control.

Take away: *When a shower goes badly, the first thing to adjust is your approach — not your volume.*

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Check the Reasons in This Order

Don't guess. Start at #1 and stop as soon as something fits — it may be a different reason tomorrow.

1. Pain or Illness — Rule This Out First

A sore shoulder or a UTI looks exactly like stubbornness. No script works on pain.

- ☐ Ask two or three questions — no more — and wait a full 30 seconds for each answer: "Does it hurt when you lift your arm?" · "Does it hurt to stand up?"
- ☐ Look for a sore spot or a rash where you'd be touching them.
- ☐ **Red flag:** a refusal that came on suddenly in someone who used to be fine. Call the doctor and check for a UTI first.

2. Cold — The #1 Sensory Reason

Cold air ends more showers than anything you say.

- ☐ Is the bathroom warm before they walk in? Not the water — the room.
- ☐ Is there a warm towel or robe waiting where they can see it?
- ☐ Is the water hitting their face first instead of their back?

3. Fear of Falling

To a brain that has lost its balance, wet tile and a tub wall read as danger.

- ☐ Do they grab the wall, the towel bar, or my arm on the way in?
- ☐ Has there been a fall or a near-fall they never told you about?
- ☐ Am I asking them to stand the whole time, or to step over a tub wall?
- ☐ Is there anything bolted in to hold onto, and is the floor safe when it's wet?

Three things that fix most of this:

- ☐ **A shower chair** — sitting takes the fear out of it.
- ☐ **Grab bars**, properly mounted. A towel bar is not a grab bar.
- ☐ **Grips or a non-slip mat** on the shower floor.

Take away: *Fear of falling looks exactly like refusing. Make the room safe first.*

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4. Control & Embarrassment

Getting clean is private, and it has always been done alone. Dementia hides their decline from them, so your help doesn't feel like help — it feels like an accusation. Refusing isn't stubbornness here. It's dignity doing its job.

- ☐ Did I leave them a job to do, or am I doing all of it for them?
- ☐ Am I the fight? Could I borrow someone else's authority instead?
- ☐ Would they rather have someone of the same gender helping?
- ☐ Have I offered to hold a towel up over the private parts?
- ☐ Do they have a reason to get clean that matters to **them**?

The workhorse line: "I'll get your back, you do the rest."

To normalize it: "Everybody wears these now — they're just underwear."

To take the fight off you: "The nurse says I have to help with this part."

To give them a why: "The doctor's coming at two — let's get you ready."

Take away: *Give them a job and a reason, and the fight usually goes out of it.*

5. Too Complicated

A shower is about twenty steps. They can still do four of them. When they freeze or wander off halfway through, they didn't quit — they got lost.

- ☐ Am I giving one step and one sentence, then waiting 30 full seconds?
- ☐ Is everything out and in order before they walk in?
- ☐ Is the mirror covered? A stranger in the glass ends a shower fast.
- ☐ Is it the same time and the same person, so the routine starts before the argument does?
- ☐ Would twice a week and a sink wash be clean enough?

One step at a time: "Hold the soap." · "Now your arm." · "Good — the other one."
· "All done. Here's your towel."

Take away: *One step, not twenty. The silence in between is doing the work.*

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Write Down What Worked

You will figure things out about your person that no cheatsheet can tell you — and then a hard week will go by and you'll lose it. Write it down the same day it happens, and keep it somewhere anyone helping you can find it: a notebook, the back of this page, a note on your phone.

After a shower that went well, answer these four:

1. **What time of day was it**, and who was with them?
2. **What did I say or hand them** right before they got up?
3. **What was different about the room** — warmer, quieter, mirror covered, towel already out?
4. **Which reason turned out to be the real one** this time?

After one that didn't go well, just one question:

1. **Where exactly did it fall apart** — walking in, undressing, the water, the hair?

Keep a short "what works for them" list

A few lines is plenty. The kind of thing worth saving:

- Mornings after coffee, never after dinner.
- Won't go for me, will go for her sister on the phone.
- Hand him the towel first — every single time.
- Hair at the sink. Never in the shower.

Why it matters: *Your hardest-won wins are still there next week, and the next person who helps you starts where you left off instead of starting over.*

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The Whole Checklist in One Look

Tape this part to the inside of a cabinet door. When you're standing in the hallway and they've already said no, start at the top and work down.

The 5 Reasons, in Order

- 1. Pain or illness** — rule it out first. No script works on pain.
- 2. Cold** — warm the room, not just the water.
- 3. Fear of falling** — a chair, grab bars, grips on the floor.
- 4. Control & embarrassment** — give them a job and a why.
- 5. Too complicated** — one step, one sentence, then wait.

A Note Before You Go

Nothing works 100% of the time with everyone — after thousands of dementia patients and caregivers, these are simply what work the most often with the most people. Some days you'll check every box and they still won't go, and that's okay. A missed shower is not a failure, and a person who is a little less clean and a lot less frightened is not a caregiving mistake. The goal was never to get it perfect. It's to walk in with a few more tools than you had before, and to be a little kinder to yourself along the way.

Progress over perfection.