

I Know You're In There

A woman with dementia moved into her daughter's home. The woman kept going to a locked door and trying to open it. She would bang on the door and yell, "I know you're in there!" When her daughter would tell her, "Mom, that's just a closet with some cleaning things in it," her mother would say, "You're lying!" What should the daughter do?

Who is this person? Not much information is given here. It appears that this location is associated with a person and an event in the mother's past that was unpleasant.

Making use of abilities that remain. She can walk and she can see. In addition, she can speak and give answers. An important thing to determine is if she can still read. If so, printed information can help with finding a solution.

Gather the evidence. In this case, a location in the environment consistently seems to upset her. Was there a similar location where she used to live that was associated with an unpleasant event? Why this location? Does she do this with other closed doors, or just this one? Ask her who is in the closet. Open the door, show her the contents of the closet, and observe how she reacts.

Use the formula. If this behavior has a sudden onset, it might be useful to check to see if the older woman has an infection or other physical problem. A check to insure that she does not have a UTI might be useful.

Solution. Get the cleaning things out of the closet and take off the closet door. See what happens. If this does not solve the problem, does the older woman now go to other locked doors? Does she continue to go around the house searching for the person who used to hide in the closet if you take off the door? If so, it might help to know who she is looking for. Is there a way to externally store the information that the person she is angry at and looking for is not there (like an obituary – real or not – put in a memory book)?

CLUE: Who is supposed to be in the closet?