Building a daily routine that helps prevent wandering

Caring for someone who may become disoriented or wander away from home brings a mix of love and worry. You want them to feel independent and safe, yet the thought of them walking out the door without a clear sense of direction can be unsettling. The good news is that a thoughtful daily routine, built around small but consistent habits, can reduce the chances of wandering while still respecting the person's freedom. This article walks through the key steps for creating that kind of routine, with practical things to watch at each stage.

Understanding why wandering happens

Before you set up any new habits, it helps to see wandering not as random behaviour but as a response to something. For someone living with dementia or age-related confusion, wandering often has a trigger: restlessness, boredom, a need for the bathroom, a search for a familiar place or person, or even a reaction to noise or bright light. The first step in building a safer routine is to notice what usually happens just before a wandering episode. Does it occur at a certain time of day, after a meal, or when the person seems anxious? Keep a simple log for a few days, noting the time, the person's mood, and what was happening around them. Over time, patterns will appear, and those patterns tell you where to focus your efforts.

Start with a predictable daily schedule

Predictability is calming for someone who feels disoriented. When the brain struggles to make sense of new information, a familiar sequence of events becomes a kind of anchor. Aim for a daily schedule that repeats the same activities at roughly the same times each day: waking, meals, rest periods, walks, and bedtime. The schedule does not need to be rigid, but the order should stay consistent. For example, breakfast is always followed by a short walk, then a quiet activity, then lunch. Write the schedule down in a visible place, or use picture cards if the person responds better to images. The goal is to reduce the number of moments where the person feels lost or uncertain about what comes next, because those moments are often when wandering starts.

What to watch: Look for signs of agitation or confusion at transition points, such as between activities or when the routine is interrupted. If you notice restlessness after a certain activity, try shifting its position in the day or swapping it for something calmer.



Build in meaningful activity during the day

Boredom is a major driver of wandering. When the person has nothing to do and nowhere to direct their energy, they may start moving simply to feel purposeful. The routine should include at least one or two activities that the person genuinely enjoys or finds soothing. This might be folding laundry, sorting items by colour, looking through a photo album, listening to familiar music, or potting plants. The activity does not have to be complex. What matters is that it engages the person's hands and mind in a gentle way. Keep the duration short, ten to twenty minutes, and stop before the person becomes tired or frustrated. You can repeat the same activity at different points in the day.

What to watch: If the person loses interest quickly or becomes irritable during an activity, it may be too demanding or too dull. Adjust the level of difficulty or switch to something completely different. The aim is engagement, not achievement.

Use physical activity as a planned outlet

Many people who wander are simply responding to a natural urge to move. Instead of trying to suppress that urge, make it part of the routine. Schedule a regular walk at the same time each day, preferably in the morning when the person is often most alert. Walk the same route each time so it becomes familiar. If the person is able, let them set the pace and choose the direction within safe boundaries. This gives them a sense of control while still keeping the activity contained. On days when going outside is not possible, consider indoor movement: walking the length of a hallway, gentle stretching, or simple exercises while seated.

What to watch: Notice whether the person seems more settled after the walk or more restless. If walking seems to increase agitation, try a shorter route or a different time of day. Also watch for signs of fatigue, which can increase confusion later.

Create a calm environment in the late afternoon

The late afternoon and early evening, sometimes called the sundowning period, is when confusion and restlessness often increase for people with dementia. Your routine should account for this by shifting to quieter, low-stimulation activities as the day goes on. Dim the lights, reduce background noise from the television or radio, and avoid new or demanding tasks. Offer a warm drink, a familiar snack, or a gentle hand massage. The idea is to signal to the person's brain that the active part of the day is winding down. A predictable wind-down routine can reduce the urge to wander in the hours before bedtime.



What to watch: If the person becomes more agitated despite a calm environment, check for physical discomfort: hunger, thirst, needing the bathroom, or pain. Sometimes the restlessness is not about the environment but about an unmet need.

Make the home safer without making it feel like a prison

Even with the best routine, there will be moments when the person tries to leave unexpectedly. The home environment can be adjusted to give you peace of mind without making the person feel trapped. Simple changes include placing locks out of sight or at the top or bottom of doors where the person is less likely to notice them. Camouflage a door by painting it the same colour as the wall, or hang a curtain over it. Install a motion sensor that alerts you when a door is opened, or use a simple bell on the door handle. The aim is to give yourself enough warning to redirect the person gently before they step outside.

For extra reassurance, consider a device that can help you locate the person quickly if they do wander. A GPS-based tool, such as the one offered by familyr.co.nz, can provide real-time location information and send alerts to your phone. This kind of device does not replace a good routine, but it adds a layer of safety for those moments when supervision lapses. You can use it as part of a broader care plan that also includes emergency contacts and a clear missing person response, just in case.

Prepare a wandering response plan

No matter how careful you are, there may be a time when the person leaves and you cannot find them right away. Having a plan in place before it happens saves precious minutes. Write down a list of the person's usual walking routes, favourite spots, and places they might go if they are searching for a former home or workplace. Keep a recent photo of the person, along with a description of what they are wearing, in an easily accessible place. Share the plan with neighbours, family members, and nearby friends, and ask them to call you if they see the person out alone. Program emergency contacts into your phone, including the local police non-emergency number. Some GPS devices, like the one from familyr.co.nz, allow you to set up geofencing, which sends an alert when the person leaves a designated safe zone. That kind of feature can be part of your response plan too.

What to watch: Review the plan every few months and update it if the person's walking patterns or favourite spots change. Also make sure the contact numbers are still correct.



Review and adjust the routine regularly

A routine is not a one-time fix. As the person's condition changes, what worked last month may no longer suit them. Set aside a few minutes each week to think about how the routine is going. Is the person sleeping better? Are there fewer episodes of restlessness? Do they seem

more relaxed during certain activities? Adjust the timing, duration, or type of activities as needed. If a new pattern of wandering emerges, go back to the first step: look for the trigger and see if you can address it through the routine. The goal is not perfection but a steady, flexible approach that keeps the person as safe and content as possible.

Building a safer routine for someone who may get lost is a process of observation, patience, and small adjustments. You are not trying to control every moment; you are creating a structure that reduces confusion and meets the person's basic needs for movement, engagement, and calm. When you combine that structure with a few practical safety measures and a clear plan for emergencies, you can feel more confident that the person you care for is protected, even when you cannot be right beside them.