

Partners in Care

By Lisa M. Petsche

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Have a Nice Visit in Long-Term Care

Many people find visiting a relative or friend in a long-term care residence an uncomfortable experience, at least initially. They don't know what to expect or what to say and do. The following guide can help to ensure a positive visit.

Visiting Tips

- Call ahead to the unit where the person resides, to find out the best time of day to visit.
- Plan to visit when you aren't rushed for time.
- Bring something with you: flowers from your garden, a photo album, a magazine or newspaper, a guest book for visitors to sign, a favorite music CD, a special food treat. Check first with staff whether or not the person has any diet restrictions.
- Position yourself at eye level, face to face. Ensure you are close enough and speaking loudly enough that the person can adequately see and hear you.
- Actively listen to what the person has to tell you. Express interest in their daily activities, and allow them to vent their feelings about their situation.
- Encourage reminiscing ("Remember when...?") This stimulates the mind and evokes pleasant feelings.
- Tell some jokes or a funny true story, or bring in a humorous movie to watch together, since it's true that laughter is good medicine.
- If conversation is difficult or impossible, share news about family, friends and current events, read aloud or listen to music together. Sit in the lobby and people-watch. Learn to become comfortable with silence.
- Check the recreational activities schedule for regular and special events, and accompany the person to one of them.
- Telephone between visits if you can't get in as often as you would like.

Visiting a Person with Dementia

- Visiting a person who is mentally impaired can be challenging. You may not be able to relate with them in the usual ways because of impaired communication, memory deficits or altered personality. Visits can still be meaningful, however, once you adjust your expectations and learn new ways of interacting. Read on for some guidelines.
- Visit alone if possible. It is much easier for the person to deal with one visitor at a time. If you find visits awkward, though, bring along a friend for support.



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Have a Nice Visit in Long-Term Care (cont.)

Visiting a Person with Dementia (cont.)

- Come prepared for any possible mood. Or, call ahead and ask what kind of day the person is having. If it's a bad one, postpone your visit.
- Approach the person slowly and from the front, giving them time to see you coming. Make eye contact and use touch as appropriate.
- Address the person by name and identify yourself. Be prepared that they may not recognize you or may not recall previous visits. (Do not quiz them, as this can cause frustration.) Rest assured that this does not make your presence any less valuable. Your visits not only provide mental stimulation, they validate the person as a unique and worthwhile individual.
- Find a quiet place to visit in order to avoid distractions, since over-stimulation leads to agitation.
- Speak slowly and clearly. Use familiar words and simple sentences. Avoid cliches. Talk in a calm voice, using a low-pitched tone.
- Ask simple questions that require a short answer - preferably yes or no. Avoid posing questions that challenge their memory, such as "What did you do today?"
- Use body language - gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, touch - to help get your message across.
- Don't argue when the person has their facts confused. If a conversation appears to be causing frustration, change the subject. If they become restless during an activity, try something else.
- Don't take verbal outbursts or other uncharacteristic behavior personally. Shorten the visit if it's going poorly - if the person is irritable or fatigued, for example.
- Following a difficult visit, do something for yourself - such as going for a walk or soaking in a hot bath - to help relieve tension.

If visiting is stressful, consult with a nurse, recreation therapist or social worker regarding visiting tips and coping strategies.