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Visiting a Loved One in Dementia Care

by Janine Jackson, Educator and Care Specialist

Care facilities come in many forms. Licensed care facilities include skilled nursing, assisted living and memory care homes, often referred to as board-and-care. These places serve the same purpose: to give your loved one a safe place to call home either for a short or long-term stay. Regardless of the reason why our loved one is living there, these care facilities may evoke a wide range of feelings and emotions in us. In some cases they illicit a sense of calm and comfort, taking much stress off families, knowing their loved one is safe.

For others though, residential care facilities may be an intimidating place because of what they have heard or seen from different sources. These feelings are completely natural. Knowing what to expect when visiting a residential care facility can be helpful in lessening those feelings of fear and anxiety.

Expect: Myriad of Feelings

You may experience a wide range of feelings during your visit. It is OK! You are not expected to be an emotionless guest with someone with whom you have shared many a laugh, a story and a life. Acknowledge your feelings and those of your loved one. This will allow you to be present in the moment and meet them in their reality. Bring a physical item to help connect with them. Stimulate their senses by bringing a favorite cologne or flower. Even something as simple as holding their hand can elicit a deep connection.

Expect: Food Restrictions or Eating Limitations

When you visit you may want to bring your loved one food they enjoy, such as chocolate or a bag of potato chips. This may be a great way to further your bond during the visit. It is



important, however, to be mindful of their dietary orders. Some people may have dietary restrictions such as low sodium or limited sugar per their doctor's orders. Others may be physically limited when it comes to eating. If your loved one is in the later stages, they may have difficulty swallowing or they may not be interested in eating. If their limitations or restrictions are new to you, this is a great opportunity to speak with their care staff to become better informed.

Expect: Your loved one may want to "Go Home"

Some of the hardest phrases to hear from a loved one residing in a nursing home can be, "I want to go home" or "please take me with you". If this is a recent move, they may be reacting to the unfamiliarity of their new environment. Otherwise, the urge to go home could be their way of expressing feelings of confusion, abandonment or rejection, among other emotions. How can you help your loved one? Reassure them. Be patient with them. Affirm their value as a person and as a member of the family. This will go a long way in helping them feel safe and loved.

Although your loved one is being cared for by a team of professionals, you are still their advocate. It is OK to have some healthy



Tips

Don't worry if your loved one won't remember what you said or even the visit, you still created treasured moments of joy together.

Thank your loved one for something they have said to you or done for you in the past and how much it meant to you.

Tell your loved one about how they have inspired you, either because of something they did in the past or are doing now.

Share your love for that person and how much they mean to you.

Bring a small gift -- something you know that they will enjoy (for example a small plant or flowers, a photo, a food item that they love to eat), or a "comfort" item like a lap blanket or adult oriented stuffed animals.

Remind your loved one of fond memories of the past, i.e. a job that they loved, or a positive family event.

Listen to your loved one, really listen and empathize with them. Validate how they feel. You don't always have to fix them and make it all better.

Plan for periods of silence. Tell yourself that you can handle five or ten minutes of nothing but silence.

Listen for the meaning or feeling behind the words. Attempt to use more body language than any other kind of communication.

Your mood affects their mood. Stay calm, even if there are problems. Always refer to their residence as "home" and a positive place.

Laugh with them. Have fun and be playful, tap into your loved one's playful inner child.

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skepticism when your loved one is residing outside of the home and ensure they are being treated with dignity and respect. Whether this is your first or hundredth visit, there is still a need to be observant of your loved one's living environment. When you are visiting, take some time to make some observations.

Observe:

Interactions within their environment

One of the more vital observations is how your loved one interacts within their environment. People with Alzheimer's disease can tell you a lot about how they are feeling; you just have to watch how they behave. Pay attention to how your loved one interacts with others while you are there. Do they seem comfortable with the staff providing their care? Do they shy away from some staff more than others? Conversely, are staff comforting and patient when working with your loved one or other residents?

Behavior can express much more than a person can say at times - so be aware.

Observe:

Cleanliness and Personal Care

Because this is your loved one's home, make sure that they live in a clean environment. Take note of the cleanliness of their room and shared living areas. Is their bedding clean? Is their bathroom sanitary? With regards to personal care, ensure your loved one is appropriately dressed for the season or time of day. Also notice if your loved one is clean and well-groomed. If they consistently have poor hygiene, talk to their care team to fix the issue.

Residential care facilities enhance the lives of those that reside there. Facility staff should treat each resident with respect and dignity, promote independence, and provide a safe place to call home. Hopefully you feel more prepared for your visits now that you are equipped with an understanding of what to expect and observe when visiting.



The following are some great pointers suggested by Jolene Brackey in her book, *Creating Moments of Joy for the Person with Alzheimer's Disease*:

- ◆ Begin by introducing yourself, using a familiar nickname, and address your loved one by their favorite name. If awakening them, try gentle massage, a kiss, or a warm hello.
- ◆ Visit as a third person. Instead of saying, "mom", say her name. She thinks her kids are little and now you might be lying because you can't be her kid...you are old!
- ◆ Avoid conversations dealing with the "here and now". Tap into their pleasant past memories.
- ◆ Visit in small groups. Sometimes one to one is best.
- ◆ Give your loved one enough time to respond to questions or directions – do not rush him/her.
- ◆ Consider the person's interests and abilities and discuss what they might enjoy doing. You may have to adapt this activity depending on changes in the person's cognitive and physical ability.
- ◆ Consider planning activities for visits ahead of time, then be flexible according to the person's mood or level of abilities during the visit.
- ◆ When planning an outing be sure to keep it simple with little stimulation. Maybe it's just going for a drive in the country, walking in the park or having a picnic in a quiet area. The less people involved, the simpler the tasks, the more enjoyment you will both have.



Tools

Alzheimer's Store - where you can get suggestions and shop for items created for dementia patients. ALZstore.com

Ombudsman - Should you need assistance in advocating for a person living in a residential care setting. In Santa Barbara County call 805 922-1236.