

Visiting in long-term care during COVID-19

During the visit

What to do if the person does not recognize you

The person's ability to recognize you will depend on many factors, including their ability to recognize you before restrictions were put in place, their emotional state at the time of your visit, and for some, the level of interaction they had with you from a distance if visits through a door/window or video calling have been available to you.

For many people living with dementia, masks make it challenging to recognize a person or follow a conversation with them.

What you can do:

- Do your best to exaggerate the features in the upper portion of your face above your mask to communicate what it is you are saying; for example, widen your eyes, raise your eyebrows, furrow your brow, or nod your head while speaking. Remember to speak slowly, keep your sentences short, and allow the person additional time to process what you are saying.
- Try your best to use positive language when talking about COVID-19 and the precautions put in place to keep everyone safe. You might say, "This mask does look funny, doesn't it?" or, "How wonderful that we can see each other again."

While the person may not recognize your physical appearance, they may remember the way you make them feel and will still appreciate your company. For some, sensory cues such as hearing your voice or holding your hand may help to



remind them that you are a person who is important to them. Keep in mind that as the disease progresses, it is natural that a time will come when the person will no longer be able to recognize you.

What you can do:

- Try to involve the person in a pleasant activity that stimulates the senses and activates multiple parts of their brain. For example, playing a favourite song for them on your smartphone or tablet; or showing photos while you talk about a favourite memory from your past that the two of you share.

It may just be a bad day. If the person is feeling tired or depressed, they may have greater difficulty recognizing you.

What you can do:

- If possible, try booking your next visit with the person when you can expect them to be at their best. You may find another time works better for your family member.

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What if the visit does not go well?

For the person living with dementia, it can be difficult to understand why you need to wear a mask, or why physical distancing needs to be practiced. They may not recognize you under the mask and become confused or agitated during the visit.

What you can do:

- Validate the emotion you are observing in the person you are visiting. Even if the person is no longer capable of communicating to you using verbal language, their body language or behaviour may communicate how they feel. For example, if you notice the person's brow is furrowed and their lips are pursed, you might say something like, "You look angry. I am so sorry. I will help you anyway I can."
- Reassure the person that you understand how they are feeling and that you are there to support them. For example, "I was nervous too when I first saw people wearing masks. It's okay, it's still your daughter under here."
- After you have validated how the person is feeling and reassured them that they are safe, try to redirect the person's attention to something positive that they typically enjoy. For example, "You always had the most beautiful flower garden. Should I plant purple marigolds or yellow marigolds in my garden?"
- If the person appears too agitated or confused to continue the visit, despite your best efforts to comfort them, try again another time. It may take time for the person to get used to seeing you again under new circumstances.



Ending your visit

Ending your visit might mean that a meaningful time together has now come to an end, and how the visit ends can have great potential for continuing or changing the tone of the visit long after it ends. With visiting restrictions still in place, saying "goodbye" can be a reminder that when the visit ends, you are not there, leaving the person sad or lonely. The longer the person has been living in care, the harder it may be when that visit ends.

- Where possible, try to avoid saying "goodbye" when ending your visit, and instead, choose language that is positive.
- Remind the person how much you have enjoyed their company and appreciate their time, and that you will call them again. For example:
 - "Seeing you is the best part of my day."
 - "I can't wait to see you again."
 - "I'll be back in a few days. See you soon!"
 - "I need to pick up your prescription from the pharmacy. I'd better go."