

Once your family member moves into a long-term care home you or others may find it hard or uncomfortable to visit. You may find it hard to have a conversation, to know what to say or what to do. As your family member's dementia progresses you may see changes in their abilities that effects what you do during your visits. You may encounter difficult emotions; your family member may not recognize you or even want you there. In these cases, you may wonder what the benefits of your visits are. Keep in mind that visiting can help, at some level, to meet needs by showing the person they are valued and cared about.

"When do I go?" How long do I stay? What do I do?" are all questions that many caregivers ask. It is important to find answers that make you feel comfortable. Some caregivers feel that visiting every day for half an hour works for them, while others prefer visiting one morning a week. It all depends on you and your family member. For some, knowing what to do during a visit comes naturally. Others may struggle with how to fill the time. This information sheet contains some ideas of what to do and say during a visit.

How Often?

There is no right or wrong answer here. Every situation will be different depending upon how you feel; your own needs; and your understanding of the needs of your family member. Visiting is the main way to stay connected with your family member. When your family member moves into a long-term care home your role as a caregiver does not end, it just changes. You may choose to stay involved with practical tasks, such as assisting with mealtimes. Or you may become involved in the social or spiritual activities of the home. Now that you know their

physical well-being is taken care of, you might look at your caregiving role differently and start to enjoy some quality time together. Visiting also serves to reassure you that your family member is receiving an acceptable standard of care from the long-term care home.

Before the Visit

Depending on the situation you may it helpful to call ahead to arrange a time that is convenient for a visit. Also consider that each person has a 'good time' during the day. Try to plan your visits during this time. Mornings may be better for your family member than afternoons, or vice versa. Talk with staff to find out when they feel the best time is, however keep in mind that it may not always be possible to visit during these times.

The Visit

Below are listed a number of ideas for making your visit more interesting or enjoyable for both you and your family member.

- Bring in newspapers or magazines to look at together.
- Play games (e.g. cards, checkers) that your family member has enjoyed in the past. Be prepared to offer cues to assist your family member. Don't worry about following all the rules.
- Help decorate and tidy their room.
- Participate together in activities/events, offered by the home (e.g. pub night or special event).
- Arrange to have a private meal together.
- Go for a walk.

- Bring pets, if allowed by the long-term care home.
- Include children; they can be a source of much pleasure.
- Compile a memory book of past events – newspaper cuttings, photographs, certificates etc and reminisce together.
- Take picture books of previous hobbies or jobs, e.g. gardens, buildings, trains, paintings.
- Incorporate music. Bring a portable instrument (e.g. harmonica, drum) or a tape/CD of favorite music. Sing, whistle or hum.
- Bring in interesting objects to look at, discuss or hold.
- Say I love you. I came to see you, and I'll be back again. (regardless of the reaction to your visit)
- Gentle teasing or joking provides a sense of continuity and pleasure to those who have always communicated this way in their families.
- Silence can be golden.
- Find a quiet place so that you can be heard easily and where they may be fewer distractions.
- Bring a thermos of juice or tea and some snacks and have a 'picnic' together.

Let's Talk

Communication is a basic human need, and as a visitor you will need to take the initiative for successful communication, both verbal and non-verbal. Dementia affects someone's ability to understand and make sense of the words that they hear, as well as get the words out that they want to say. It is important that you have an understanding of the person's communication abilities when you go to

visit. Over time your family member will become more sensitive to your non-verbal body language. Self reflect on the message you send out through your body language and tone of voice. When speaking, keep sentences short and simple and wait for a response. Introduce yourself with name, e.g. "Hello Dad, it's Jan, your daughter" and try to maintain eye contact. The following are some additional tips to keep in mind:

- Use clear and simple sentences.
- Speak slowly and clearly.
- Questions should ask for a "yes" or "no" answer.
- Talk about one thing at a time.
- Use common phrases.
- Provide time for your family member to process information.
- Be patient.
- Be accepting of inappropriate answers or words.
- Understand that they may not remember accurately – don't demand that they do.

Rephrasing

You may have to make changes to how you speak with your family member. Everyday questions that we use in most of our common social interactions may not be the best for your family member. Consider rephrasing how you say things to avoid putting your family member on the spot or causing them unintentional embarrassment or anxiety.

For example:

Instead of "what did you have for lunch today?" try, "How was lunch today?"

Instead of "who is that sitting over there" try "that person looks nice, let's go meet him."

Instead of ``you just told me that`` try, ``that`s interesting, I did not know that``.

Instead of ``do you remember me?`` try ``Hi, I`m glad to see you``.

Later Stages

As your family member`s disease progresses, interaction and communication may become more difficult. In these later stages consider the following:

- Touch can communicate caring. Hold hands, provide a gentle backrub or arm and leg massage.
- Give a manicure. Use a file, clippers and a soothing hand lotion (lavender or sandalwood are good scents).
- Facial expressions. A smile, comforting gaze or a look of affection can often provide reassurance.
- Music can provide comfort and a sense of familiarity. Listen, sing or hum.
- Walk. A stroll, even in a wheelchair, can be enjoyable.

Leaving

Leaving after a visit can be a difficult time. Your family member may want to go with you or become upset when you leave. Try the following:

- Tell staff when you are planning to leave so that they can be there to help.
- Remind your family member that you enjoyed their company and will be back soon.
- Time your departure to coincide with an activity or meal.
- Keep farewells brief and leave straight away. Lingering, apologizing or staying a little longer can make future good-bye`s harder.

- Indicate you need to go to work, do homework, doctor`s appointment etc.

If your family member forgets when you have visited it may be helpful to keep a visitor`s log book. The log book can be kept in their room and everyone who visits can make an entry. Entries should list who was there and when and describe some of things you did or discussed. Later, if your family member feels that nobody has been by to see them, staff can reassure them by going through the book.

Wanting to Go Home

A common phrase you may hear from your family member is that they want to ``go home``. This can be especially hard for you to hear. Wanting to go home may be caused by feelings of insecurity, depression or fear. It may be that `home` is a term used to describe memories of a time or place that was comfortable or secure. `Home` may be memories of childhood or of a home or friends who no longer exist. To cope with this, try the following:

- Try to understand and acknowledge the feelings behind the wish to go home, for example, ``you feel comfortable and safe at home, don`t you?``
- Reassure by connecting through touch. Hold hands. Reassure them they will be safe here.
- Reminisce by looking at photographs or by talking about childhood and family, for example ``What a great house that was! The yellow kitchen was so welcoming!``
- Try to redirect the conversation. Engage in another activity; go for a walk; sit down with food or drink.
- Don`t disagree or try to reason.

Be prepared. Even by utilizing some of these tips and suggestions, your visit may not work out as you planned. Be flexible. Cut your visit short and try again another day. The important thing is that you are trying to maintain the connection with your family member.

When you are ready, there are 4 other information sheets in the Placement Series:

- Making the Decision
- Day of Placement
- Adjustment following Placement
- Communicating with Staff

Other resources available from the Alzheimer Society include:

- Adjusting to LTC
- Caregiving Options: Considering LTC
- Guilt

Resources:

1. Strauss, C.J. (2001). Talking to Alzheimer's: Simple ways to connect when you visit with a family member or friend. New Harbinger Publications.

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