

TIPS ON VISITING FRIENDS AND RELATIVES

What would you think life would be like if you were living in a nursing home? You might be conscious of being physically removed from your familiar home and community. You might feel lost, unsure of how you will adjust to this new place. You may feel that you've somehow been rejected.

During this time of transition, the need for human interaction is especially important. Maintaining ties with friends and family helps to assure the new resident that he or she has not been abandoned, that important relationships will continue just as they did outside the nursing home.

You, as the visitor, may feel anxious at the thought of visiting the nursing home. "Nursing homes depress me," many people say.

At first, the sight of so many elderly people who have suffered some form of disability may be upsetting. But you must learn to look beyond the physical appearances. Think of each resident as an important individual who has lived a long and full life, and whose uniqueness does not depend on physical appearance.

You may be bothered by those who appear to be confused or disoriented. Keep in mind that these people can be reached by simply holding their hands and looking into their eyes. Even a person in the later stages of Alzheimer's disease will still respond to tenderness and affection.

As you make plans to visit someone living in a nursing home, remember that the facility is that person's home, and you should show the same sort of respect you showed when the resident lived outside the facility. Call and ask what time is convenient for you to pay a visit. A resident may feel more energetic or sociable at certain times of the day. Or he/she

may simply have other plans. In addition, he/she will have that visit to look forward to, which extends the pleasure.

Most facilities have very liberal visiting hours lasting 10 to 12 hours during the day. Be sure to check on these hours before you visit so you don't interrupt meals, bath-times or other regularly scheduled events. Some nursing homes encourage visitors to join residents at mealtimes. If you decide to do so, you should expect to pay for your meal.

One word of caution about visiting: there is a tendency to "promise a rose garden" and be unable to deliver. Do not promise to visit and not come. If you cannot keep an appointment, call in advance and immediately suggest an alternate time.

When you and your friend or relative are planning your visiting times together, look over your schedule carefully and realistically. Decide how much time you can spend each week or month. Realistic planning avoids disappointment for the resident and feelings of guilt or anger for you.

Who Should Visit?

Anyone who was important to the resident outside the facility should visit him/her in the nursing home, children included. Young children rarely react negatively to aging or sick individuals. On the other hand, teenagers and older children may need some time to adjust. Staff members, particularly social workers, can be helpful in aiding this process.

Planning for the Visit

Some people feel that they don't know what to do during a visit to a nursing home. In this case, simply ask yourself what activities you enjoyed with this person outside the nursing home. Did you listen to music together? Did you play cards? Did you watch old movies? There is no reason you can't continue to share these same activities in the facility. And there are many other activities that you can try to help make visits rich and interesting:

- One idea which is always very therapeutic is to bring the family pet to the nursing home. The benefits to the elderly of contact with animals are widely acknowledged. Seeing the family pet would be especially uplifting. Be sure to contact the administrator in advance to make arrangements.

- If you videotape family events—graduation ceremonies, little league games, school plays, and the like—make arrangements to show the videos to the resident if he/she cannot attend these events. This will give him/her a better sense of contact with family and the outside world. Showing the resident family photographs will serve the same purpose.

- Or why not treat the new resident (female) to a manicure or fix her hair? This sort of physical contact is very important to the nursing home resident. And your acknowledgement of her concerns about her physical appearance will mean a great deal as well.

- Elderly people often have difficulty in writing letters. You can have a very productive visit by taking dictation from the resident. And the resident will most certainly receive mail in return, which he/she will cherish more than you can imagine.

- If the resident is a fan of games, bring along your checkers or chess set, scrabble board, or deck of cards

And when you're at a loss for ideas, check with the facility's activity director. He will likely provide you with a whole list of ideas and possibly materials with which to work. A special note—conjugal visits also are important. Two people who have lived together for years are entitled to private visits without intrusion. For any home that is certified for Medicaid and/or Medicare, the Residents' Bill of Rights protects the right of conjugal visits unless otherwise ordered by a physician.

The Visit

When people come to visit you, they come to the door and knock or ring the bell. A resident room in a nursing home is an individual's home. Knock before entering and ask permission to enter. If the resident is unable to respond, then announce yourself before walking in.

Greetings usually involve some sort of physical contact. You shake hands or hug or kiss. Touching tells us that we are accepted, human, and desirable. Staff members try, of course, to provide affection, but they can never fill the shoes of the family and friends of the resident. Once in the room, make some form of physical contact unless it is absolutely inappropriate.

There are some instances in which you may think visiting is pointless. Visiting is never pointless. Even if a resident is comatose, you should continue visiting. No one knows exactly what senses remain in a comatose person; however, we do know that hearing is the last sense to disappear.

Visit, announce yourself, and touch the comatose person as you always have. Then you can sit by the bedside and hold the resident's hand, stroke the forehead or whatever is comfortable for you. You can even talk quietly, since the resident may hear exactly what you are saying.

Visits Outside the Nursing Home

Many residents are able to leave the facility for a meal, a day, a weekend, or a vacation. And these sorts of outings mean a great deal to them. Visits outside the nursing home reinforce the fact that the resident is still a vital part of family and community. In addition, it may reinforce the benefits the nursing home affords. The difficulty of bathrooms and steps that are not designed for handicapped people will become readily apparent.

If you are considering taking a resident out of the nursing home, plan first with the resident. Then be sure to tell a staff member, so he can have medicines and special equipment ready. It is wise to give a week's notice if any special arrangements need to be made.

Visiting should be pleasant and enjoyable for family, friends, and the nursing home resident. Plan ahead, involve the resident, and above all: don't let his/her "nursing home resident" status interfere in the wonderful relationship you have always enjoyed.