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## Tips for Visiting Your Loved One

Why Your Visits Are Important • Before, During, and After Your Visit • Ten Practical Suggestions

### **Your Visits Are Important**

Visits from family and friends are always appreciated by persons who live in a senior care facility — and your visits are very important. They provide an opportunity to stay in touch, to express emotions, to share experiences, and to simply enjoy time together. Above all, visits help remind the person you are visiting that he or she is still a valued family member or friend.

### **Before Your Visit**

Should you plan ahead for visits, or just drop in? Visits on the spur of the moment are usually better than no visit at all. But keep in mind that many persons would prefer knowing ahead of time when to expect a visitor. That way they can look forward to the visit. And they can be rested and ready, with no other scheduled activities or therapy to conflict with the visit.

A little preparation goes a long way. Each resident's situation is different, and often a person's interests, health condition, or mental status will change over time. So it is a good idea to develop a sense of why and how your visit can benefit the person you are visiting, as well as yourself. For example, think for a moment about the person's needs and interests. What would he or she appreciate most in a visit? Would he or she enjoy...

- having someone to talk with?
- discussing what's happening in the family, community, or world?
- being asked for an opinion or advice?
- listening to reading or music?
- sharing an activity or meal?
- keeping up past relationships?
- reminiscing?
- being touched or hugged?

## During Your Visit

During your visit, one quality will stand above all the rest. That's the quality of being completely focused on your visit and the person you are visiting. Chances are that your visit is one stop in a busy day. It is easy to be distracted. . .to think about where you were last, or what you'll be doing next, or to share with the person you're visiting just how busy you are.

Try not to do this. Staying focused and attentive shows that you value your visits– that you enjoy them as much as the person you are visiting does. It shows that you are not visiting only because you feel you must.

And when it comes to being focused and attentive, remember that your body language often speaks louder than words. So set aside as much time as you can comfortably afford, then relax and give your time and attention at a calm and caring pace.

## Simple Gifts

Should you bring a gift for the person you are visiting? From time to time, and particularly on special occasions, a small gift will be appreciated and can serve as a pleasant reminder of your visit after you've left. Remember, though, that space is usually limited, so the best rule of thumb is to keep your gift small, simple, and personal. Here are some suggestions:

- a card—this can be one you purchase or one made by you or another family member
- flowers or a plant
- something to read or listen to
- stationery and stamps
- personal care items (such as soap or lotion)
- non-perishable food items (but check with staff first).

## Ending Your Visit

Ending a visit is sometimes difficult. Many residents and guests find that using the last few minutes to plan another visit, or talk about upcoming activities or events at the facility is a useful way to ease the transition and lessen the awkwardness of parting from a loved one. Staff can give you additional suggestions if saying goodbye is a problem.

## Dealing With a Difficult Situation

Let's face it – powerful emotions are involved as residents and family members deal with prolonged illness or disability and the need for long term care. A recent event or long-standing unresolved issue may trigger feelings of anger, frustration, sadness, fear, or loneliness – in you; in the person you are visiting; or in both of you. In a resident, resentment and difficult behavior can be caused by the medications he or she is taking, by fatigue, or by his or her physical or mental condition.

The important point is to understand and accept that some visits may be emotionally trying—or worse. That doesn't mean that your visit was not meaningful or useful. . .and it certainly doesn't mean that you should not visit again, or as often as you might otherwise. But if you are having trouble dealing with strong emotions or difficult behavior, be sure to get help. The facility's social worker can help you understand what is going on, and can make practical suggestions, such as when the best time to visit would be, how long to stay, and so on. Additional resources, such as a support group, might also be available.

## Checking in With Staff

As part of your visit, it is often a good idea to check in with staff. Your support and personal involvement will always be appreciated. And your knowledge of the person you are visiting helps the care team understand the resident's unique needs and feelings.

### Ten Ideas For Your Next Visit

- Participate together in a scheduled activity or day trip.
- Spend time reading out loud or listening to music.
- Work on a family photo album.
- Give a manicure or help with hair care.
- Share a meal together in the dining room or resident's room.
- Help with organizing personal items or cleaning out a closet.
- Go for a stroll outdoors if the weather permits, or sit outside and talk if there is a patio or courtyard.
- Bring a younger family member or a pet (but check first with staff).
- Celebrate birthdays or other special occasions (check on the availability of a room large enough for a family gathering).
- Bring an old friend who probably wouldn't otherwise be able to visit.