

Visiting with Elders

“The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.” Helen Keller

Being together and sharing stories and events is the foundation of our relationships. But when older people develop sensory losses, physical disabilities and cognitive losses, visitors are sometimes uncomfortable and not sure what to do. Communication is possible, but in different ways. Your interest and pleasure, as you respond to and build on an older person’s emotional stance, will provide guidelines and feedback to you about the precious moments that visits can provide.

Maintaining our identity, our sense of competence, is central to all of us and this attribute continues as we age. The older person needs to feel respected and validated throughout the visit. Emotional memory persists for those with cognitive loss. Observe and interpret behaviour and use as clues as to have to proceed. Acknowledge your relative’s feelings and emotional state. Empathize, then move onward in a respectful manner.

Change your expectations of visits as your relative’s functioning undergoes changes. For elders who suffer from memory loss or speech impairment, try to avoid asking information – seeking questions, such as “What did you have for lunch?” Turn questions into statements about the here and now. For example, “It is good to see you today”, “I like your shirt/dress.” Activities can help generate pleasurable feelings. For example, try brushing their hair or massaging their hands with perfumed cream. Listening to music, browsing through a magazine, sitting at the window, or going with them to a program are all activities that provide your elder with pleasure and stimulation without the need to make conversation.

Create a tangible record of your times together such as a journal/visiting log or taped conversation that can be referred to at other times by your relative, staff or friends. The process of reflecting on past visits created positive feelings for the older person. As in all of life, a sense of humor is often the best tool to help us through uncomfortable moments. Humor can open the door to lost emotions, simple understandings and even some insight.

Visiting your relative in a long-term care home can be a challenging and stressful experience for you and your elder. Having realistic expectations and insight about yourself, your elder and the institution will help with this transition. If your relative blames you for ‘putting them away’ or upsets you for other reasons ask to speak with a social worker or other staff members. There may be a support group you can join to find out that you are not the only one experiencing these feelings. Before you visit, prepare yourself for what mood your relative might be in. If the visit is not going well, give yourself permission to shorten it.

Visiting takes energy and the following might help you prepare. Arrange to visit when and how often it works for you. What times are best for your relative? Be aware of scheduled activities and consider whether you would like to attend with your relative or visit at a quieter time. Consider a location that allows you some privacy to visit and minimizes the amount of noise and distraction.

There are many benefits of having children visit. Young children can quickly learn to respect, care for and build a connection with their elderly family members. Children like to help and can participate in any number of activities. Your relative will also benefit from the simple joy of watching a child play and a child's endless supply of hugs and kisses.