

Visiting Your Loved One During the Holidays

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Visiting your loved one with physical or cognitive limitations may be difficult or uncomfortable. Conversations may be strained and you may not know what to say and do. Because visits are so important, here are some suggestions of how to make your visits more comfortable and easier for you both.

Start a conversation and then just listen. Give your loved one your full attention. Watch their body language to be alert to the feelings that may be expressed beneath the words.

Physical Activities

There are a number of physical activities that can be stimulating for both and can make visits a positive experience.

- **Give the person a backrub or gentle arm and leg massage.** These can relieve discomfort caused by immobility and lack of exercise. Just rubbing the skin with body lotion is very soothing.
- **Give the person a manicure or pedicure.** Bring a file, lotion. Women especially enjoy having their nails polished.
- If possible, take the resident for a walk up and down the halls or around the grounds.
- Join in the Community's activities and join in on the fun with our residents and activity staff. Make it a routine.

Communicate by engaging the senses

Stimulate their sight by showing them large colored objects and bold forms. Try looking at clear family photos; a large calendar; posters; mementos; picture books with animals, flowers, or birds; and children's drawings. Remember to put on glasses, if needed.

Connect through music. Try bringing a CD or MP3 player in and listen to their favorite show tunes, children singing, or messages from distant relatives or friends. Dance if the person is ambulatory. Tell jokes, read poetry aloud, and listen to birds singing. You might even make a long distance call to a friend while you're visiting; many residents can no longer write letters but do wish to keep in touch with old friends. When visiting, you can also help write letters and prepare holiday cards.

Touch is very important. Most of us enjoy hugs, kisses, and handholding.

Having a meal together is a wonderful visiting activity. Make your visit around a mealtime and ask the community their process to stay for a nutritious meal. You can also stimulate their taste buds by bringing in your loved one's favorite foods and beverage as long as there are no dietary restrictions. Another suggestion is to meet with our Food Service Director to plan a private gathering of family or friends in our Private Dining Room for a personalized experience in the resident's familiar surroundings.

Smell is one of the most powerful evokers of memories and emotions. Bring perfume, powder, or lotion. The smell of vanilla may remind the resident of baking, mint extract may bring to mind the mint patch in the backyard, and liquid smoke can evoke memories of cookouts or wiener roasts. Provide the fragrances of flowers, plants, incense, and air freshener to stimulate the resident. If possible, take him or her outside to smell the seasons.

Remember that whenever you visit you want to bring **joy and, if possible, laughter.** It is permissible to cry all the way home if it helps you.

What to Say/Do When There's Nothing to Say/Do

- Say I love you, I came to see you, and I'll be back again (regardless of their reaction to your visit).
- Do not take it personally if your visit is short.
- Sit close, away from window glare, at eye level, and touch or hold hands as preferred by the resident.
- Look for clues to feelings through body language, eyes, or repeated phrases.
- 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--tender moments watching birds, listening to music, or praying can be wonderful for you both.
- Respect personal space and possessions. Ask before moving things around or sitting on the bed. Go slow... keep pace with the person's concentration and tolerance.
- Substitute shared activities for limited conversation: manicures, massages, looking at photo albums, watching TV, walks, writing letters.
- Reminisce about your favorite holiday, first car, baking in the old home, the smell of a wood fire.
- Use the arts and your skills--music, poetry, photos, video or audio, artwork--to stimulate the person. Play games (even if they can't play as well, they may still enjoy the activity.)

What to Avoid

Avoid:

- Rushing in, standing at the door as if you are on your way out.
- Staring out the window, check your watch, or look bored.
- Apologizing for your guilt or feelings of failure
- Giving advice, nag, or talk down (baby talk).
- Providing a litany of your problems or obstacles to visiting.
- Changing the subject when the person expresses negative or sad feelings.
- Talking about the person as if he or she is deaf.
- Spending all your time with other residents or staff.
- Talking about the person to others while they are in the room.

Many times we are also asked about gift suggestions for the holidays, so here are a few: Ask about gift certificates to the community's beauty salon/barber; gift certificates for manicures/pedicures; magazine subscriptions or the local newspaper; a cuddly, soft, throw blanket; perfumed soaps or shower gels for pampering. Please call your Wellness Director, Case Manager, or Director of Nursing to provide more suggestions or help you talk out your visits to make them memorable and enjoyable throughout the Holiday Season.