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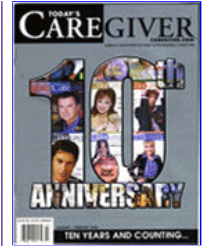
Magazine >> May/June 2005 >> Making Nursing Home Visits Meaningful



**Making Nursing Home Visits Meaningful**  
by Sandra Stimson

Often times as nursing home residents decline they lose the ability to communicate. Sadly, this is a time when families stop visiting as often because they don't know what to say or how to make the visits meaningful for the family as well as their loved one. Sometimes, just being present can be satisfying. Here are some tips for the families:

- Visit together in the facility sensory room.
- Prepare for the visit ahead of time. Bring items of interest with you. For example, if your loved one had a love of pets, you could bring your family pet to visit. If he or she had a love of a certain kind of music, bring a CD to play while in the room.
- Talk with your loved one about events going on in the community or family. Don't assume they can't understand. Just hearing your voice will bring comfort and keep them connected with the outside world.
- Bring their favorite foods and spices for the visit but make sure to adhere to the diet recommended by the dietician and physician.
- Reminiscence about past experiences. Bring in old family photographs. They may enjoy just listening to your memories. If they are able to respond, this may spark a memory.
- On their calendar, take a highlighter and mark the date of your next visit. This will remind them that you will be returning soon.
- Personalize their room. Now is the time they need the most stimulation. Look how you can make their room pretty while at the same time reflecting their personality. You could put up sports banners, add family photos, put pictures on the walls, a CD player at bedside with favorite CD's, plants, decorator pillows and pretty afghans, nickknacks that are meaningful to them, lotions and perfumes/colognes, fake fish tanks (real one if someone can take care of it), wind chimes over the bed.
- Bring a book of their favorite author and read to him or her during your visit.
- Bring flowers from your garden.
- Try aroma therapy. You can purchase candle warmers and electric aroma therapy machines. Use smells that they would like but be aware that medications can make them nauseous. So light smells such as lavender may be preferred.
- Provide hand massages and back rubs. Often times the touch they receive is by the facility staff. Having a massage can be really uplifting, especially when being touched by a loved one.
- Include children in the visit. Bring things for the children to do. It could be a children's book that the child can read to the resident. If there are animals or bird cages in the facility, plan your visits there.
- Don't be afraid to laugh and share humorous stories. Bring funny cartoons and funny stories to share. It's ok to laugh.
- Bring cassette tapes of the religious services from their local church and share the church bulletin.
- Bring the local community paper and read what is happening in their local community. It will help them still feel connected.
- Share events happening in your family.
- Read poetry.
- Share a meal with them. Many facilities allow families to purchase a



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meal and eat with the loved one in the dining room.

- You could do a makeup session or fix their hair. You can bring pretty nail polish and do a manicure.
- Share a scrapbook or photo album.
- Go for a stroll together. Nothing is like a visit outside. Many facilities have lovely patios.
- If your loved one is able to take a drive in the car, go on short outings. Suggestions would be a ride around the community, zoo, restaurant, park, church, local store or a pet shop. Call ahead to make sure the destination is wheelchair accessible.
- Bring them to family gatherings, such as weddings, holiday dinners and religious events.
- Bring games they enjoyed, cards, checkers, chess, word puzzles.
- Bring crafts they enjoy, such as yarn or cross stitch.
- If they like to read but now are unable, purchase books on tape.
- Bring a video of family events such as weddings, graduations, baseball games, dance recitals, or share a video with them of a movie you enjoyed.
- Begin a project that you can work on each time you come. For example, if they loved to garden, you could begin a flower press book and dry the flowers. Once they are dried you could make a collage together and hang the picture on the wall.
- Assist your love one with writing a letter to a friend or relative.
- Help fulfill their final wishes. It may be contacting a long lost friend, or giving away a valuable. Listen to "what they want" and don't make judgments. There are organizations that grant last wishes of the elderly. It may be a hot air balloon or a dinner with all of their loved ones.
- Exercise with them. There are several video tapes for elderly in wheel chairs. It could be simple arm lifts, walk or hand exercises.
- Place calendars and clocks in their room with large numbers. Don't assume they can't tell time.
- Hug a lot.
- Create a tactile blanket with different textures and items of interest to touch.
- Bring items related to the season, such as pumpkins, poinsettias, spring flowers.
- Decorate their room for the seasons, with decorations and scents specific to the holiday or season. Take down old decorations.
- Bring fresh fruits and vegetables.
- If the facility has a community kitchen, cook a meal together. Some facilities have activity rooms where you could have a large family gathering.

- Follow the nursing homes schedule for visits. Generally it is better to visit in the afternoon. In the morning, many facilities are busy providing care and getting residents dressed. Phone ahead to let staff know you're coming. Follow through; if you say you're coming, please show up when you said you would. Always knock before entering the room. Always state who you are. With dementia, they may forget your face. Feelings are the last to go, so they may feel terrible if you say, "Mom, this is Sally." But instead you could say, "Hi Ruth, my name is Sally and I came to visit with you."



Get to know the staff. Find out what's new about your loved one.

Let your loved one express their feelings and accept them. They just need someone to listen. You don't have to have all the answers. Your presence is present enough. Enjoy the time you do have and the tender moments together. Try to leave negativity at home. Make your visits joyful and pleasurable. Don't rush in, act bored, put down the resident, make them feel guilty about their health, or act like you would rather be somewhere else. They know!

If you plan what you will be doing before your visit, you will have a successful and rewarding experience.

*Sandra Stimson is the Executive Director for Alternative Solutions in Long Term Care. Sandra has*

*run caregiver support groups for many years. . Her expertise is in the area of dementia unit development. She is also the Executive Director of National Council of Certified Dementia Practitioners [www.nccdp.org](http://www.nccdp.org) which advocates that all health care professionals are trained in the area of dementia with a minimum training of 8 hours and ongoing training while working with dementia clients.*

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