

Excerpt from “When you Come to Visit”

Just for Families series of publications from the Toronto Homes for the Aged

Communicating with an individual with dementia can be very difficult. It can leave family members, visitors and residents feeling frustrated and dissatisfied, if the visit does not go well.

Visiting your loved one is extremely important, however — a successful visit will make a very positive difference in the resident’s day. A quality visit provides comfort, support and reassurance to the resident, and makes the resident feel loved, cared for and valued. A quality visit also provides comfort and reassurance to you, by confirming that you can still make a positive difference in your family member’s life, and by reaffirming the love the two of you share.

Often in the early stages of dementia, people have trouble finding the words to express their thoughts, or may be unable to remember the meaning of simple words and phrases. The later stages may be much more difficult. Language skills can be quite impaired, and the resulting statements are garbled. Sometimes it is difficult to understand what the resident is trying to say.

When people cannot comprehend what is being said or cannot find the words to express their thoughts, it can be painful, frustrating and embarrassing.

Your approach will set the tone. Think about how you are presenting yourself. Are you tense? Frowning? Try smiling!

People with dementia are often aware of non-verbal signals such as facial expression, body tension and mood. Try a calm, gentle, matter-of-fact approach. Your warm smile and relaxed manner may be contagious!

People with dementia are “like a mirror” and will often reflect back whatever emotions the visitor is feeling and expressing.

Go at your family member’s pace. People with dementia often need more time than we do to respond. Use slow, gentle motions. Make sure you have your family member’s attention. Sit down at eye level with the resident. Make eye contact. Smile. Tell the resident who you are and why you are there. Use gentle touch. Use loving words.

A successful visit will add value to both you and your family member’s day

Tips for enhancing your visit

- Visit when you want to visit, not when you think you should visit.
- Find out the best time to visit with your loved one. Generally, people with dementia tend to be more alert during the late mornings and early afternoons. Talk with staff members and try to find out what is the best time to achieve a quality visit with your family member.
- Watch for fatigue. Signs of tiredness could include repeating conversations, irritability, walking away from you or asking you to leave. A short visit is usually better than a long one.
- Enjoy the silence. Silence can be a sharing and touching experience. Merely sitting and watching is good. Ask the resident if you may read to them, pray together or sit together.
- Live “in the moment.” People with dementia can only talk about things that they see, hear and feel at the moment. This is their reality. Go along with it. Remember your family member is doing the best that they can. They may have moments of “reality.” Share these moments with them, and see them as gifts.
- Try “tidying the house.” Ask your family member if they could help you tidy up a bit. Meaningful and familiar activities such as folding clothes, rearranging books and magazines, wiping tables, e t c. , make people feel useful, and this is still important to your family member.
- Be flexible. If your family member begins to wander, walk with them. If they seems to be more agitated, come back at another time.
- Use distraction. Distraction is a very helpful technique to draw your family member’s attention away from one thing to something different. If your family member gets upset, bring attention to something else.
- Give one instruction at a time and use physical cues. Rather than saying “Come and sit at the table, it is time for tea,” try saying, “It is time for tea!” (with enthusiasm), pat the chair (a physical cue) and sit down beside your family member.
- Your family member is unable to entertain. ” Come prepared to do something with them. Bring a book, a photo album, favourite music, map, etc., to reminisce. The ideas are endless.
- Massage your family member’s hands and feet with a soothing lotion. Give a manicure. Bring a picnic, pizza or donuts. Enjoy a stroll in the garden.
- Most of all have fun!