

Successful Nursing Home Visits

What makes a visit to a nursing home resident “successful”? The resident feels “in touch” with the world outside the nursing home? The resident has a renewed sense of dignity and self worth? The visitor has a sense of significant participation in another person’s life? How can you make this happen?

Plan ahead. Ask staff or family what is the best time to visit. Generally, the best times are in the mid-morning from 10:00-11:30 am, in the afternoon from 2:00-3:30 pm, and sometimes in the evening from 6:00-7:30 pm. For someone with dementia, it may be best to avoid the late afternoon or early evening “sundowning” time. Find a time when the person’s mood and attention are at their best.

Older persons respond to things that stimulate their five senses. Answers to these questions will suggest items that you might take with you, or topics for conversation. What do you like to see, to watch? What do you like to touch, to feel? What are your favorite aromas, smells? What sounds do you like to listen to, to hear? What flavors do you like to taste? In response, you might take with you a videotape of grandchildren playing, a fragrant lotion to massage into the resident’s hand; a recording of their church choir or congregation singing favorite hymns, etc. Be creative! You can stimulate positive, happy memories.

The visit. Begin by saying who you are. This is particularly important for the person with dementia. Call the resident by name, and say something like “I’m here to visit you.” Be at eye level with the person and reduce distractions to minimize the resident’s confusion.

Additional tips. Using your normal conversational tone (taking into account any hearing impairments); speak slowly, but do not be patronizing. Be patient, allowing time for the resident to absorb, understand, think and respond.

Be prepared that not everything the resident says will make sense. The resident may seem to be rambling, but respond not only to a person’s words, but also to the emotional tone. You might acknowledge a feeling by saying something like, “You sound very sad”

You don’t need to fill every moment with conversation. You might sing a favorite song together. Just sitting and looking out the window can be enough. Remember that even someone with serious memory loss can still enjoy the moment. Share the moment with a compliment, a joke, or a caring smile. Enjoy it together!

Source: Bosak, Susan B., *Ideas and Tips for Visiting Nursing Home Residents*, The Legacy Project, 2004; Alzheimer’s Association Fact Sheet, *Visiting*, 2006.