

# TIPS FOR VISITING A PERSON WITH DEMENTIA WHEN THEY ARE IN LONG TERM RESIDENTIAL CARE

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The decision to have a person with dementia transfer to a long-term residential care facility is never one that is made lightly. Once the decision is made there will be several things that will have changed. One very important thing work through is how to make visiting as positive and beneficial as possible. First things first, it is helpful to make your person's room as comfortable and homely as possible as soon as you are able. This will help you relax in the knowledge that they are surrounded by comfortable and familiar things when you are not there.

## Tips for making the visit easier:

- Things you could bring with you:
  - Check with the facility – it may be possible to have a pet visit with you.
  - Bring in an edible treat to share.
  - Bring in a fun activity to do together.
  - Bring in a newspaper or a magazine to look at.
  - Bring in a pocket-sized photo album and look through the photos together.
  - Bring in a friend or a family member to share in with the conversation.
  - Encourage grandchildren to visit.
- Learn the facility schedule so that you visit in free time rather than scheduled activity times. This will ensure your person is able to enjoy both your visit and the activities to the full.
- If they are happy with your assistance, help decorate and tidy their room.
- Shorten your visits - it would be better to visit for 20 minutes 3x a week than for 1 hour once per week. Your person with dementia may struggle to focus for longer periods of time.
- If your person with dementia enjoys the garden, take them for a walk out in the garden and enjoy it together. Look for a bench in the shade to sit and chat.
- Listen to music or audiobooks together.
- Read the mail together - help them write to friends and relatives.
- Watch a well-loved movie or TV programme together.
- Assist with personal grooming; wash or brush their hair. Cut or paint their fingernails.
- If they are settled, they might enjoy a short outing:
  - A short drive to a scenic lake to enjoy the sun and ice-cream!
  - Go out for afternoon tea.
  - If a outing outside the facility is not possible, even a walk around the facility gardens can provide a change of scenery.
- A person with dementia will often talk about “home”. This may not be their recent physical home but could be an image from a time in the past when they felt peaceful and secure. This occurs especially if the person with dementia is disorientated. It can be very upsetting for visitors, especially if you take their words literally, so it is important to understand as much as possible about what is happening for your person.
  - It is a good thing to ask the person with dementia to talk about “home”. Ask questions about what their home was like such as “what is their favourite thing about home?” Talking about their story and their family will give you a better idea of your person's current reality and how you can best reassure them.
  - Reassure them that they are safe and that the staff at the facility will contact you if there are any problems.

- Then divert to another activity.
- If “home is a common theme in their conversation, it is helpful to take note of the content and context of their conversation and the time of day it frequently occurs. If there is a pattern it will help clarify what is happening for them and how best to put something in place to minimise any distress.

#### **If leaving is distressing:**

- Give yourself a finite time for the visit. Let your person know how long you can stay at the beginning of the visit or take along an activity to do together – when that is finished its time to go home.
- Ask the staff of the facility to divert your person while you leave.
- Leave at a mealtime so that your person is engaged in something else to do.
- Keep farewells brief- leave straight away.

#### **If your person is settled enough, they might enjoy an outing:**

- Short outings are better.
- Take a short drive to a scenic place and have an ice cream together.
- Go out for afternoon tea.
- Taking your person home may be unsettling for them- it is helpful to discuss this with staff before and after the trip home to assess whether it is appropriate or not.
- Even a walk around the garden in a wheelchair can provide a change in scenery.

#### **Visiting a person with more advanced dementia:**

- It is often helpful to let your senses be your guide. Activities that involve sight, taste, smell, hearing, and touch are good activities to try.
- They might enjoy a hand or foot massage with perfumed oils.
- Bring in flowers with a scent.
- Hold their hand or give them a hug.
- Play familiar music which is comforting and brings back lovely memories.
- Let them see you smile.
- Read a favourite book or poem to them.

#### **Keeping in touch when you live out of town.**

- Nowadays it’s much easier to stay in touch with the help of modern technological devices. It is helpful to establish a regular routine, so calling at the same time or week is helpful. It is also important to liaise with the staff to ensure your phone call or video call can happen with assistance and in an unhurried manner.
- Take your time, people with dementia can sometimes take longer to understand the concept and fully engage in the call. Be patient, and if the call is unsuccessful the first time – be prepared to try again.
- Video calls might be easier if a chat over the phone is becoming harder.
- Remember to check out any information your person with dementia might give you- it may be real, or it may be perceived.
- Work out a strategy for dealing with any problems that may arise.
- Another thing that is usually well received if visiting, is not always easy is a “care box” with small items that you know your person will enjoy, e.g. photos, a block of chocolate or a bag of sweets, a warm pair of socks, a recorded message from you etc.

Once they are living in long term residential care, visiting your person with dementia is a very important way to continue to show love of them as well as ensuring that they are receiving the very best care. To that end it is well worth working hard to foster the best relationships possible with the staff at the facility. Entrusting your person into their care is one of the biggest tasks you will have at this time, so it is important that you and the staff work to create a good working relationship, with a focus on trust.

May your visits continue to create special moments and lovely memories.

#### Other helpful articles/websites

- [Residential Care Options: Visiting Someone in Dementia Care - Family Caregiver Alliance](#)
- [Staying involved - Alzheimers New Zealand](#)
- [‘I want to go home’ - What to say to someone with dementia in care | Alzheimer’s Society \(alzheimers.org.uk\)](#)
- [Visiting someone with dementia | Dementia Australia](#)
- [Long-term Residential Care for Older People: What you need to know \(health.govt.nz\)](#)
- [Dementia - coping with placement - Better Health Channel](#)

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