



Making the minutes count:

How to visit a parent in long-term care

By Deb Jenkins, RN, BScN, MN(c)

When someone we love is admitted to long-term care (LTC), our initial visits to see them can be very stressful, even before and after the actual visit. To help make these visits go more smoothly for everyone involved, here are a few helpful tips:

can have a bearing on how your parent, spouse or friend might “welcome” you. Also, check if there is a flu or respiratory outbreak at the home. During such outbreaks, staff restrict who, when and even if you can visit. This helps ensure the health of both residents and visitors.

Planning the visit

Consider the best visiting times for you, your loved one and the LTC staff. For example, visiting is not helpful when the front-line staff are getting the residents ready for their day. A good rule of thumb is to not visit before 10:00 a.m. and not during the resident’s bedtime, which in some cases is quite early in the evening.

- Check with the home on their visiting policy. Once a loved one has been bathed, has had breakfast and has all the “grumpies” out, the visit will go much better.
- Try not to visit when you or your family feels under the weather. If you are coming down with a cold or have a cough or sore throat, it may be best to stay home. Older adults in LTC are very susceptible to illnesses and have only a limited resistance to fight off nasty cold or flu bugs. Even though you can’t visit, you can still phone your loved one, or, if they can’t communicate, you can call the nurse’s desk mid-day or in the early evening to see how your loved one is doing and to send a message.
- In anticipating your visit, try to pick the best day. Has your family member been ill? Are they starting on a new behaviour medication? Do they have a test coming up or have just had one completed? All these and other things

During the visit

Many older adults in LTC have dementia, which causes short-term memory to deteriorate. If your loved one has such a condition, here are some tips to make your visit memorable:

- Focus on the positive and steer clear of any topics that don’t evoke fond memories. Some examples might be the War, the Depression, or a family member with whom they don’t get along. Bring in happy photos to share, such as those of pets or small children. Try not to quiz them, but rather explain who is in each photo.
- If your loved one is able, doing something physical, such as a short walk to the cafeteria or the “tuck shop,” or even a short walk outdoors can be rewarding for everyone. Remember to check with the nursing supervisor and sign your family member out. (In case of a fire drill or other emergency, all residents need to be accounted for on short notice.)
- Late afternoon visits are best as residents often get restless at that time of day, or they may be tired, hungry or even a bit “agitated.” A short upbeat visit during this time to take your loved one to supper time can lift their spirits. If your loved one needs assistance with their meal, help them cut their food or just be

“Getting old is when you find your car in the parking lot.”

Anonymous

How to handle complaints

If your loved one complains regularly about the staff, the food, the environment or other residents, talk to the nurse in charge. Your loved one's complaints may be valid or they may reflect their general unhappiness with their situation. Caregivers and staff should always work together to keep the lines of communication open and to not place blame. Older adults living in LTC can be challenging. The better you communicate about sharing the care, the better their stay and your visits will go.

there to encourage them. Also, ending a visit can sometimes be difficult, so leaving the visit part-way through the meal is a good time to go. They will be occupied and won't make a fuss when you leave.

- Stay for short and meaningful visits, but visit often. A familiar face is helpful to your loved one even if they may not recognize you due to their dementia. Remember, everyone loves a friendly smile or even a warm hug, especially a resident in LTC.

After the visit

Often sons, daughters, spouses or just about anyone feels guilty when their visit has ended,

especially if it hasn't gone well. Here are some tips to make the minutes count and to deal with those feelings of guilt that might creep in following a visit:

- Try not to "re-hash" the visit in your own mind, or beat yourself up for things you should have done. This tip is particularly important for a daughter (or son) whose mom may be hard on them during visits and constantly complain about the home, the food, or the staff.
- If your loved one is less than pleasant during your visit, shorten it or give yourself a break for a few days. Remember, they are not the same as they once were, so don't take it personally! Most likely, it is just the situation that their aging or illness has created.
- Allow your loved one to repeat their stories no matter how many times they tell them. Remember, great stories are always better "remembered twice!"



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