

VISITING – A WAY TO STAY CONNECTED

Someone you know has Alzheimer's disease or another dementia – someone with whom you have enjoyed a warm relationship filled with conversation, laughter, outings and sharing of the highlights and struggles of your lives. As the abilities of the person with dementia change, you want to remain connected but you wonder how to do this.

Visiting is a traditional way of maintaining connection with important people in your life. A person with Alzheimer's disease or another dementia finds enjoyment in the companionship that a visit offers. The person who is visiting may find that they need to approach the time they spend with the person with dementia differently so that both people feel that the visit is successful.

Ideas that you may find helpful:

1. **Remember that your visit is an ongoing part of the relationship that you share.** While you are focusing your visit on the person that you care for, plan your visit so that you gain something from the experience as well.
2. **Approach your visit in a calm manner, free of expectations of how the person you are visiting will respond.** Try to establish eye contact with the person, call them by name and be responsive to the emotional messages that they communicate to you.
3. **Visit as frequently as you are able.** Each visit will renew the person's connection with your voice, face and touch. If the person begins to think you are a stranger, gently remind them of who you are and your relationship to them. Remember that their actions are a result of their dementia and are not an effort to hurt you.
4. **Plan your visit around a theme that represents the things that you and the person you are visiting value.** Use objects that provide sensory stimulation to reconnect the person with memories that you share. Activities that emphasize the strengths of the person will foster positive responses.

Because people with Alzheimer's disease or another dementia have difficulty initiating an activity, the person who is visiting needs to be prepared to direct the visit. Planning your visit around a theme or idea may be helpful. Bringing items that can help focus your time together can increase everyone's enjoyment.

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Suggested themes for visits:

1. **Music visits:** Take music associated with special events, holidays or seasons of the year. Enjoy the music by listening, singing along or experiencing the rhythm.
2. **“Celebrating the person” visits:** Take any objects that represent the life experiences of the person. This might include items related to past work, hobbies or community service. The object can stimulate conversation and reminiscence.
3. **Faith or spirituality visits:** Take inspirational books, music or items of spiritual significance, such as a prayer shawl, rosary or yarmulke with you. Invite the person to hold the items while you read, pray or sing. Some people find the sharing of quiet times meaningful as well.
4. **Table talk visits:** Take coffee and muffins or cookies and the newspaper. While enjoying the snack items, chat about family news, read the comics or discuss current events. Relate the long held thoughts and feelings of the person to the present conversation.
5. **Touch visits:** Take soothing oils or lotions that you can use while gently massaging a person’s hands, feet, shoulders or back. Consider taking relaxing music to play while you give the massage.
6. **Active living visit:** Plan to go for a walk, do some gardening, play a game or work on a craft project. These visits are excellent opportunities to include children and youth in caring for an elder.
7. **Pet visit:** Take an animal that the person enjoys for a visit, or visit with the pets that live at the care centre. People with dementia enjoy the unconditional love that animals share.

Some families have a guest book in the person’s room where each visitor records their visit, a little about what they did with the person and how the person responded. This can help other visitors rekindle the memory of the activity and plan future visits.

Though you may be tempted to use your visit to connect with care providers at your family or friend’s place of residence, remember to choose another time and place away from the person you are visiting to ask questions about their care. Honour the person you care for by using the same social courtesies with them as you would with others.

People with dementia often do not like to see your visit come to an end. They may ask to go home with you or they may become emotional. To assist you through this potentially difficult time, you might take the person to a group activity lead by care providers. When the person is happily involved you can then slip away. Other people find it helpful to plan their visit for prior to mealtime. The person’s interest can then be refocused to a part of their daily routine. If your family member or friend is finding the adjustment to your leaving especially difficult, ask a staff member to be with the person for a few minutes after you have left.

People with Alzheimer’s disease or another dementia appreciate the sense of value and connection that a visit gives. Being prepared for a visit that will meet the needs of the person with dementia adds to the meaningful nature of the visit for the person who is visiting. When planning your next visit, remember that the greatest gift you will give to your family member or friend will be the gift of your presence!

References:

1. Enhancing the Visits of Loved Ones of People in Late Stage Dementia. Mary Lucero, *Alzheimer Care Quarterly*, 2004, 5(2):173-177.
2. *Nursing Homes: The Family’s Journey*. Peter S. Silin, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2001.

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The Alzheimer Society of Manitoba’s mission is to alleviate the individual, family and social consequences of Alzheimer’s disease and related disorders while supporting the search for a cure.