

Transition to Nursing Home Care for Caregivers

Moving Ahead

Now that you have moved your loved one into the nursing home, here are some more thoughts on assisting you and your loved one with the transition moving forward.

The First Month

The first month will be, in some ways, a blur. And in other ways, it will seem like a year has gone by. You and your loved one will have settled into a routine and will be familiar with the staff. You'll have attended your loved one's first care plan meeting.

You may continue to second-guess your decision. Remember that a bad day doesn't make a bad decision. When you have a bad day, consider the reason. What's within your control? Can staff help you find a solution? Ask them. Are you beating yourself up for not doing more? Realize you can only do so much. Know that you will also have good days when you know the decision was right.

Take an objective look at your visiting schedule. How do you feel about how often you visit? Create a workable schedule for visits and phone calls. You also may want to include others in your scheduling efforts so that your loved one has a steady flow of visitors and conversation.

Helping Your Loved One Feel More at Home

A move into a skilled nursing care facility is a move into your loved one's new home. Keeping this positive outlook will remove many of the barriers that make it tough to transition. Help your loved one make the new home as comfortable and personal as possible.

While decorative items should not interfere with the caregiving mission or facility policies, thoughtful touches can cheer both the mind and spirit. Be mindful of not placing anything on the overhead lights or within 18 inches of the ceiling. Our maintenance staff will hang pictures and objects on the walls.

Here are some tips to create an at-home atmosphere:

- Bring things that your loved one has made or collected.
- Add comfort with favorite knick knacks.
- Add family photos or children's homemade crafts.
- Change up decor for the holidays.
- Stimulate all the senses with soft fabrics, colorful artwork, or scented accents.
- Bring the outdoors indoors, like fresh flowers, colorful leaves and other seasonal reminders to brighten the room. Live Christmas trees, however, are not allowed.
- Add magazines, books and newspapers, or tape-recorded books and/or music.
- Provide a telephone or television (consult the Resident Guide).

Handling Negative Comments

- Never hastily dismiss a negative comment. Even if the remark appears petty or provocative, ignoring your loved one's opinions will damage morale.

- Oftentimes, negative comments are used to voice uncertainty or fear. Your loved one may just want you to listen and offer support and comfort at a time of change.
- Try to really listen to the emotions behind the words. Don't prejudge the validity of your loved one's comments. Pay particular attention to verbal cues, body language, facial expressions, posture and gestures. All can help you determine the seriousness of negative comments.
- Dissatisfaction is not limited to verbal expression. It may take the shape of depression, anxiety, hostility, withdrawal or unresponsiveness.
- Always respond to negative comments, whether they are legitimate or not. Use facial expressions, gestures, statements, questions and comments to show that you're listening. Don't get upset or be condescending or patronizing in your response. Treat your loved one as an equal in the conversation.
- If you do feel a complaint could be warranted, bring it up with the unit manager. Lingering or more serious complaints should be taken up with the Director of Nursing or Administrator.
- Waiting and hoping problems will take care of themselves only gives problems time to get bigger. The staff will want to hear your concerns.
- Assure your relative that the issue is being addressed. Provide status reports to illustrate progress.
- Although you should always bring issues to the attention of the staff first, you have other avenues available to you, such as the ombudsman program to help family members resolve complaints about long term care centers (see below).

Tips For Successful Visits

You and your loved one may like to develop a visiting schedule. Routine can be comforting. Your loved one may feel more energetic or social at certain times of the day, so try to visit at those times to make visits meaningful for everyone. You also can check with staff about times when your loved one will be involved in therapies, receiving personal care, or in need of down time. Let others know when it's a good time to visit. If they need to make arrangements ahead of time, tell them how to do so. Visiting hours are 11am – 7pm.

When visiting, knock and announce yourself before entering the room. Show the same courtesy you would in a private home. If your loved one shares a room, be sensitive of the privacy of the other person and any guests.

To make visits enjoyable, think about the activities or hobbies your loved one enjoys. These could include listening to music, playing games, watching movies or sports, or swapping stories. Residents often like to talk about past events or milestones in their lives. Keep in mind your loved one's energy or interest levels may change as care needs change. Look for opportunities to keep your loved one involved in family activities and events. Family photo albums or home videos can spark wonderful memories. Videotape graduation ceremonies, sports games and school plays; then share the footage with your loved one.

If you are ever at a loss for ideas, check with the Activity Department. Some ideas include:

- Sharing photos or playing videos of family events.
- Inviting residents to attend an outing.
- Treating a resident to a manicure or pedicure.
- Helping a resident write letters.
- Bringing board games or a deck of cards.
- Taking a leisurely stroll.

Children should be encouraged to visit as well. Very young children rarely react negatively. On first or infrequent visits, older children, especially teens, may need help understanding the environment. If you need advice on how to make things more comfortable, discuss your concerns with the social worker.

Don't worry about the commotion that kids can make. The activity may be a welcome change to otherwise quiet surroundings. Children offer hopeful optimism that even nonrelated residents may find refreshing.

Some kid-friendly ideas include:

- Playing simple games like tic-tac-toe, go fish, checkers or dominoes.
- Drawing or coloring.
- Recreating childhood games from past generations.
- Offering simple signs of affection, such as making eye contact, holding hands or giving hugs. Holding a baby or cuddling a toddler is often therapeutic for residents who are unable to interact well.
- Bringing or sending a surprise for a child to open or present.
- Celebrating special events, such as Thanksgiving or the first day of school.
- Starting new family traditions. Special activities or shared treats can become something to look forward to.
- Bringing history to life with personal stories. Children can ask your loved one about historic events and firsthand experiences to create a "living history."

Outings

Many residents are able to leave the facility for a meal or longer outing. These trips can mean a great deal to residents and are usually encouraged by facility staff. When planning an outing, work with staff about a few days in advance to prepare medicine or any special equipment.

Staying In Touch

Busy schedules or distance might prevent you or those close to your loved one from visiting as often as desired. There are many alternatives to in-person visits that can help you connect with loved ones. As the saying goes, it's the thought that counts. Simple gestures are powerful reminders of the importance and relevance loved ones have in our lives.

To stay in touch, try:

- Scheduling calls to share otherwise ordinary experiences like morning coffee or afternoon tea.
- Mailing greeting cards or thank-you cards.
- Collecting media clippings of family or community activities.
- Mailing school photos and family portraits.
- Surprising your loved one with cheerful flowers.
- Packaging handmade crafts or school artwork.
- Providing equipment for sending emails, chatting online, or video chatting.
- Sharing digital photos.

Other Resources

The **Alzheimer's Association** has extensive resources for families and caregivers of those affected by dementias. Their 24/7 helpline can be accessed by calling 1-800-272-3900. Online resources <http://www.alz.org> are also valuable for many caregivers.

The **Day Kimball Healthcare Caregivers Support Group** meets the second Tuesday of the month at St. Mary's Parish Center in Putnam 1:30-2:30pm. Contact Kathy Demers, APRN of the Day Kimball Healthcare Geriatric Care Program for more information 860-377-6416.

The Connecticut **Long Term Care Ombudsman** can be reached by 1-866-388-1888 or 1-860-424-5200.

The **Family Council** at Matulaitis typically meets the second Thursday of the month at 6:30pm in the facility. Monitor signs at Center Court for specifics.

Adapted from Care Conversations, Transition to Care <http://careconversations.org/transition-care> accessed 17 December 2014.