



Family Caregivers  
of British Columbia

# Family Caregivers of BC **MAKING VISITS COUNT**

Should you have more questions, we invite you to give our staff a call at our toll-free Caregiver Support Line, open Monday - Friday 1-877-520-3267



## **MAKING VISITS COUNT**

### **Introduction**

Living in a long-term care facility brings about a number of changes which affect the quality of the life of a relative, spouse or friend and as a result your own life is affected -sometimes deeply. The purpose of this pamphlet is to share with you some of the ideas and suggestions, which have worked for others and may be helpful to you in visiting your loved one. Not everything said will necessarily apply to you. Use what you can or what seems best for you - residents and families have varying needs. It can be very difficult sometimes knowing how to begin a conversation, what to talk about or do during a visit with a loved one. This is especially true if your family member or friend is disoriented or has speech problems or a visual or hearing impairment or is emotionally stressed. Family members tell us that visits can be difficult before they become more familiar with the building, staff, routines and other residents.

### **Why Visit?**

Making visits meaningful and pleasurable means that you are more likely to want to return. Visits mean so much to residents. They tell us:

- It demonstrates that someone still cares;
- They are valued as a person;
- Breaks the monotony, as there is often little communication between residents;
- That being involved in ordinary conversation is stimulating for them - And even gives them something to boast about.

### **Getting Started**

Ask the staff the best time of day for your resident. Don't visit in large numbers. The resident will have difficulty dealing with all the interactions. If more than one-person visits, try not to talk to each other across the resident. This can be very tiring and can cause your loved one to feel left out. It is often important to introduce yourself - don't say - "Do you remember me - my name?" - you're likely to hear "of course I do", if necessary give your name ("Hello, it's so-and-so") and some background information with which the resident may be able to identify you.

### **How Long and How Often to Visit**

Most older people tire easily and tell us they prefer short visits to long ones. The fact that you have come is what matters most to them, If you've promised to visit and for some reason can't make it, do phone and let a staff member know, so that a message can be given. Once warned, they stop worrying about you or fretting that you've forgotten them. Very few people can sit down and keep an interesting conversation flowing for an hour or more, so remember that if you're visiting for that length of time, there are bound to be silences. Don't be afraid to just sit with your loved one, let them know you are



comfortable with the silence. Don't be surprised if within 15-20 minutes, you're told, 'Well, you must need to get going'.

Also, it's natural to want to visit frequently during the early stages of your relative's adjustment to his new home, but at some point, it's important to look at what you can realistically handle over an extended period of time. If your first visits are too frequent, your resident's adjustment to his new home may actually be more difficult

### **Beginnings**

A good way to begin is to give the person a chance to share his news, urge him to go beyond his physical well-being, by asking questions that elicit information, such as an outing he was to go on, or an activity he had planned. You can ask questions about somebody or something he mentioned before. You can try to include roommates in conversations. Although residents value time spent privately with them, they are sometimes appreciative of interest shown in other residents and their surroundings. Many do, however, resent time or attention being spent with others.

After your relative or friend has had time to share her news, if she can, give your news. Think ahead of time what news of family or community might interest her and in your descriptions help her feel part of the experience by use of sounds, sights, smells etc. of occasion. Good eye contact-and being at a comfortable distance from each other makes the communication more meaningful. Older people sometimes take time to respond - give them that time.

### **Sharing Sad News**

Some of us feel uncomfortable sharing sad news. We fear the person can't handle it. In fact, allowing them to share in sad as well as happy events gives them the chance to experience the full range of normal emotions. Avoiding them may mean they feel left out. Many people want to talk about death and to settle what is to be done with their possessions. They may not want answers, but an opportunity to talk about what is on their minds, with an attentive listener.

### **Reminiscing**

A resident's past interests may serve as an area for discussion. If he was an avid reader, he may want to hear about his favourite author's latest publications. Even when people can still read, they tell us how enjoyable it is to be read to or to listen to tapes. If the person followed current affairs, you might want to ask something like, what he thinks of "the mayor's decision to ...".



When the resident's ability to recall recent events has diminished, you will probably find that his recall of the distant past is often more vivid. Reviewing his life is a good idea for conversations together. One can reinforce the memories with old family photos or magazines from the 30's, 40's or songs, dance music etc. You can encourage him to tell you about important occasions in his life, which will enable him to feel that his life has been significant and that he is and has been important ask about ups and downs and turning points, major achievements, sources of pride. Asking questions like - "Tell me about that first day on the job...?" or "What was it like to in those days?", or if you have shared a lifetime of experiences together, you might include reminiscences of things the person did with you or for you. "I'll always remember when you took us on that holiday to ...however did you manage to save enough?" or "I can still remember how you used to wait up for me when I started to go out with my friends. We used to..." Listening to the same story over and over can make some of us feel impatient. As you listen you can try to understand the persons feelings, sense his mood, ask questions that may produce more details that add to the story and make it come alive in a different way. Reminiscing enables many to find peace of mind as they reflect and review major and minor life events, thus coming to an acceptance of what their life has been.

### **Listening**

Talking is a two-way street, but it's hard not to overemphasize the importance of listening carefully to what is said. Often a resident will want to describe a difficult situation not expecting you to solve it for him. Listening can be enough, making it easier for him to cope. Listening carefully to feelings and remaining quiet and calm can really help. Listening means just that, not giving advice. Listening also means accepting my feelings, not trying to tell me "you shouldn't feel that way" or "you have a lot to be thankful for", "everyone feels that". Listening also means you don't have to solve my problems - just hear me out. Sometimes I can do it myself and want to. Silence can be soothing - it gives us time to think and in its own way is communication.

### **Giving Control**

Leaving your loved one with as much to do for herself as possible is important, as it gives her a feeling of control over her own life, which enhances self-confidence, but we all enjoy being spoiled once in a while. Ask about when it would be a good time to visit Ask before moving the wheelchair. It's important to strike a happy balance - "I know you can still look after your hair nicely, but I do enjoy combing it for you - may I?"

### **Difficult Situations**

"She keeps asking me to take him/her home. It makes me feel so guilty that I dread the visits". Perhaps the best way to respond is to be sympathetic to the wish - "I know how much you would like to be



home and I wish it were possible”, but restate clearly the situation which makes it impossible - “Because you can’t balance/walk, I can’t care for you at home”, or “Because I’m not well myself/have to be out working, I just can’t look after, you properly”.

Try not to respond defensively or to ignore the feeling being expressed - “You don’t want to come home - it’s so nice here” - “You have to think about me too, you know”. Don’t make idle promises about taking her home. Many elderly people who say they want to “go home” are really wanting to return to another time when their lives were richer. Reminiscing about “home” will help. It is also important to remember that for many residents, the intense pleading for “home” passes after the first few months, as they adjust to their new surroundings.

*“Sometimes when I visit, she becomes very angry with me and quite abusive”.*

Most of the people in long term care are there because they have lost the physical and/or mental capacity for caring for themselves. They have become dependent on others for their very existence; someone must take them where they want to go, bring them food, help them in and out of bed.

The dependency is not only frustrating - “I need the toilet and they expect me to wait”, it is also frightening “what if no one ever comes!”. Many times in each day, the person may have to face situations that affect him, yet over which he has no control. Anger and rage against his life situation builds up and may spill over at times when it seems inappropriate. The anger is often directed against the very people he loves, because these are the people that it seems safe to be angry with.

Remember when your friend or relative rages, he is cursing his life, not you. React quietly and calmly, though sometimes a small puff of anger back at the unfairness of it will breathe a little reality into the situation and also help him have something to push against and so control his feelings. If this behaviour is persistent and is upsetting you, or if the person becomes aggressive, talk to a member of the staff. They may help you take a firm stand. You may need to state quite clearly that you cannot tolerate the behaviour and will leave and return the next day.

### **Difficulty Maintaining Regular Visits**

Visitors often feel as if they just can’t come anymore. Sometimes a visit has been particularly frustrating or draining, leaving one feeling emotionally down. It takes a lot of energy, imagination, understanding, to keep visiting week after week, month after month. It may be that you have missed a few visits and start to feel guilty and these feelings may prevent you from getting back on track. If you get stuck in this way, talking to someone can sometimes help. Staff would like to know if you’re having difficulty visiting, as there are often suggestions that can make a difference. We appreciate that it’s not always easy visiting your loved one, so different from the person you once knew, but we do hope that these suggestions may help you find some joy in each visit.

*By Joyce Auld M.A. MSW. Social Worker, and The Rev. Tom Bulman D. Mm. Chaplain.*