Caregiver’s Corner

Partnering With Staff for Everyone’s Well-being

Paige Hector, LMSW talks about strategies for developing great relationships with nursing home staff.

As visitation guidelines change to allow in-person visits, this is the perfect time to get to know the staff and build relationships that support person-centered care for your family member and peace of mind for you.

Introduce yourself to the staff caring for your loved one. Get to know them. You may have more in common than you realize — such as kids, pets, or hobbies — and it’s nice to create a bond beyond your loved one’s care needs. Share stories and family memories that offer glimpses and context into what’s important to your loved one and about their life before moving into the nursing home.

Approach interactions with empathy and an intention to listen deeply and understand what you and the staff member might be experiencing. If you have feelings like worry, fear, or confusion, slow down and identify what you need in the situation before approaching a staff member. Perhaps you would like reassurance, more information, or to be understood. Identifying your feelings and what you need will support empathic conversations and minimize gaps in communication.

A beautiful example of empathy happened when a friend’s mother, a nursing home resident, was upset about a lost pair of pants. My friend didn’t understand why her mom was so upset about something so minor. She kept saying, “Mom, don’t worry about the pants. We’ll get you another pair.” Her mother’s certified nurse assistant pulled her aside and said, “Your mom’s a very proud woman and has little control over her life right now, and it’s frustrating. I think the lost pants are related to your mom’s need for reassurance that her belongings are safe and that her needs matter. That’s why this situation is so upsetting.” This empathetic perspective was eye-opening for my friend.

Events can happen that may stimulate strong emotions from you. Before reacting, slow down and identify what you are feeling and what you need in the moment. It’s always a good idea to get the whole story. For instance, your dad says he is hungry because he wasn’t given breakfast or lunch. It’s understandable that your initial reaction might be anger or shock: you need to know that your dad is well cared for and that he receives his meals on time. Try approaching the situation with curiosity and empathy and get more information. If he wasn’t given breakfast or lunch, what happened? Did he decline the meal, or is it possible he forgot to eat? Has something changed in his condition? Having strong emotions is perfectly fine; it’s how we choose to interact with others that can help support a productive conversation and outcome.

Be an active participant in creating goals of care that include realistic outcomes. For instance, dad is living with dementia, and as much as you would love otherwise, he is not able to discuss books and politics like he used to. As his condition changes, it may be difficult for you to receive updates from staff that convey his decline. Remember to be gentle and provide yourself with empathy and to identify what you are feeling and what you need. Let the staff know how you are experiencing your dad’s changes; when you’re ready, ask for ideas on how you may be able to connect with your father in a different way.

Nursing homes are highly regulated, complex places to live and to work, and it can be challenging to uphold regulations, policies, and procedures, the best practices for care and treatment, and the residents’ and families’ expectations. Look for ways to partner with the staff to meet everyone’s needs.

Questions to Ask Your Medical Provider

• How can I be involved in my loved one’s care in a way that helps the staff?
• How do I let the staff know what triggers strong emotions for my loved one?

What You Can Do

• Take time to get to know the staff caring for your loved one.
• Approach interactions with empathy and genuine curiosity.
• Let the staff know the best way to reach you if they have a question or concern.
• Find out who you should contact if you have a question or concern.

For More Information

• Barbara Mantel, “How to Communicate with Frontline Staff at Your Loved One’s Long-Term Care Facility,” AARP Family Caregiving Basics, September 21, 2021; https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/basics/info-2021-communication-with-staff.html

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