



Melissa Plourde, LSW

# MAKE CONNECTIONS:

## VISITING YOUR LOVED ONE IN A NURSING HOME

**a** S A SOCIAL WORKER, FAMILY members often tell me that they struggle when visiting their loved one in a nursing home. They feel guilty because they are hesitant to go and don't know what to do or say once they get there.

Recently, I was in the lobby of a nursing facility, waiting to meet with the Social Worker. While I waited, a resident in a wheelchair was sitting with two family members who appeared to be her son and grandson. After 10 minutes of sitting in silence, the elder asked her visitors, "And why are you here today?" The son lovingly said, "Because we love you, Ma. We want to see how you are. That's why we come every week." With that said, they fell silent again and remained so until I left the area 10 minutes later.

I could tell by their tone and body language that they clearly loved their mother and grandmother. They genuinely wanted to be there and see her. They wanted her to know they loved her. But, they just didn't know what to do in their time with her, or how to communicate with her.

Here are a few activities you can try to make your time together more enjoyable. Based on their physical and/or mental capabilities, most elders enjoy keeping busy, with both their minds and their hands. Always stay aware of their physical ability and when they need to rest.

» Look at picture books or family photo albums together, reminisce about the memories they bring up.

- » Play simple games such as cards, board games, tic-tac-toe and puzzles.
- » Ask questions about their life, including their childhood, career, military service, marriage, etc. Tip - Then, record their life in print, scrapbook form, video or audio for family to treasure.
- » Share trivia and brain teasers.
- » Go for a walk, or if they can be taken out, go for a drive, day trips to the ocean, park or museum.
- » Bring your pet or a friend's (make sure to get facility approval first).
- » Watch musicals, comedies or TV shows from their era.
- » Do crafts (you can buy kits or ask the Activities Director for ideas or supplies).
- » Bring the holidays in with related songs, shows, crafts and decorations.
- » Read aloud poems, newspapers, books or magazines (and look at the pictures together).
- » Keep the hands busy - fold clothes together (even over and over again), toss a ball, make paper dolls.
- » Paint, draw and color pictures.

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*Be patient.  
Remember, you are  
there because you  
love this person.*

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- » Make scrapbooks or collages about topics they enjoy by cutting out pictures from magazines.
- » Give a manicure and/or hand massage.
- » Talk about current events, your children/grandchildren and historical events.

#### ART, MUSIC AND TOUCH

In his book *I'm Still Here*, Dr. John Zeisel's research speaks of the benefits of the arts in the elderly and those with dementia. It focuses on connecting with people with Alzheimer's through their abilities that don't diminish with time, such as understanding music, art, facial expressions and touch. Dr. Zeisel demonstrates that people with dementia are highly creative and emotionally intelligent. For example, he suggests taking your loved one to a museum. The different textures, colors and designs promote conversation, memories and emotions. If they can't be taken out, explore art books and magazines.

Try music! Play the music they grew up with and favorite music you know that they always loved. If you are not sure, try different types starting with big band, jazz, religious/gospel, show tunes, children's songs, classical and cultural music. Look for a positive response such as smiling, swaying and nodding. Even those with dementia can often recall the tune or lyrics of songs they knew earlier in

life. If they have some range of motion, try dance. (Always check with the nurses first to ensure this type of movement is appropriate). If your loved one is unable to get out of their wheelchair or bed, encourage simple movements like swaying arms.

Most people enjoy and benefit from touch. This is especially true for those at end-of-life. In my experience with hospice patients, giving a gentle massage, hugs, kisses and holding hands almost always brings comfort. (Just make sure there are no signs of discomfort or pain, like flinching, frowning and pulling away.) When you cannot think of what to do or say, simply reach out to your loved one and put your hand on theirs.

I'd also offer some tips and suggestions about what not to do:

- » Do not: Rush in or stand by the door the whole time, as if you're on the way out.
- » Do not: Stare out the window, keep checking your watch or look bored.
- » Do not: Go on and on about your problems or obstacles to visiting.
- » Do not: Change the subject if your loved one expresses negative or sad feelings.
- » Do not: Spend all your time with other residents and/or staff.



Take responsibility for making these visits worthwhile and something you both enjoy. If one idea doesn't succeed, try another. Remember, you are there because you love this person. Don't give up, and don't stop going. I always say, "I cannot change a terminal diagnosis, but I can change the way they live out their days." So can you.

*Melissa Plourde, LSW is part of the Evercare Hospice Community Outreach team in Central Massachusetts. To learn about Evercare Hospice's interdisciplinary approach to end-of-life care, visit [EvercareHospice.com](http://EvercareHospice.com). 🌸*



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*Bottom line:  
Don't give up, and  
don't stop going.*

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**Sources:**

[http://www.alz.org/living\\_with\\_alzheimers\\_101\\_activities.asp](http://www.alz.org/living_with_alzheimers_101_activities.asp); [seniors-site.com](http://seniors-site.com)

Ziesel, J. 2009. *I'm Still Here: A Breakthrough Approach to Understanding Someone Living With Alzheimer's*. Avery Press.



# Good Gifts for Nursing Home and Assisted Living Residents

*SNAPforSeniors®*, a comprehensive senior housing resource in the nation, offers this advice on welcome gifts during the holidays for nursing home and assisted living residents.

When space is an issue, what's the best holiday gift for a loved one in a nursing home? Below are some suggestions that are easy to find, take nominal space and help residents stay engaged and active.

**Holiday decorations.** It's not uncommon to see wrapped gifts under a tree and beautiful plants in the entry way of most senior housing settings. Most residents still want to adorn their private space with their own holiday symbols and decorations. A seasonal gift might be a few small poinsettia plants to liven up their apartment, a small menorah, a decorated wreath or ornaments to hang by the window.

**Food items.** Most families have traditional foods specific to the holidays. Consider items that are not difficult to chew and have a relatively long shelf life. An example could be cookies, fruitcake or an assortment of holiday candies to have on hand when friends visit. A festive holiday basket filled with jams, jellies, crackers and cheese could be a gift shared with fellow residents.

**DVDs of Classic Movies and TV shows.** Re-experiencing the old days is a favorite pastime for seniors. Whether it's the "Best of Lawrence Welk," western movies, or Hollywood classics with the Rat Pack, DVDs can bring smiles and stimulate conversations about younger days.

**CDs of their favorite music.** Music from the senior's years of youth, such as big band, jazz or classical tunes, could bring many hours of pleasure and be a gift that keeps rekindling old memories.

**Digital Photos.** Having an assortment of older and more recent photos of family and friends available would delight their living space while they muse at the latest technology. A digital photo frame is far more likely to be viewed than the traditional photo album which tends to gather dust.

**Magazine subscriptions.** There is a magazine for practically every hobby and interest. Purchasing a one or two year annual subscription can be a personalized gift that can bring ongoing pleasure to the individual, knowing that you cared enough to remember their particular area of interest. In addition, it stimulates their mind to read and stay current on hot trends related to their favorite subject matter.

**Books on tape.** For many seniors with compromised eyesight, listening to interesting new novels can bring hours of entertainment. It can also give the senior a reason to engage in conversation about the latest written works with extended family and friends, making them feel able to contribute in contemporary works of art.

**Calendar with family photos.** Select 12 of your special photos and make a calendar on your own home computer, or have it done at a photo or print shop. On the calendar, note the birthdays of all close family members as a reminder throughout the year. You can also buy a box of birthday cards for your resident to send to family members throughout the year.

**Blankets.** Room temperatures tend to vary from room to room in senior housing, so having your own personal blanket or cover-up from head to toe can be ideal. Consider machine washable fabric, which is easy to clean.

**Medic Alert Membership.** The non-profit organization, online at [www.medicalert.org](http://www.medicalert.org), offers a bracelet or necklace with a toll free number inscribed along with the senior resident's name and other essential information (e.g. allergies, medical conditions such as diabetes) on the back to a 24-hour emergency response service. The family member who takes out the annual subscription can access and update the personal health information for the senior resident any time. The service includes family notification, medical profiles with medication dosages and medical device information. If you are a caregiver living near or far, you can have peace of mind knowing that this service will provide access to current information to help the senior during a medical emergency or natural disaster.

## Questions?

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