

MAKE THEIR DAYS

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ACTIVITIES FOR RESIDENTS IN LONG-TERM CARE

By

ENID J. PORTNOY, Ed.D.



Charles C Thomas
PUBLISHER • LTD.
SPRINGFIELD • ILLINOIS • U.S.A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by
CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62794-9265

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© 1999 by CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
ISBN 0-398-06943-3 (paper)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 99-11374

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Printed in the United States of America
CR-R-3

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Portnoy, Enid J.

Make their days : activities for residents in long-term care / by
Enid J. Portnoy.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-398-06943-3 (paper)

1. Long-term care facilities--Recreational activities. 2. Nursing
homes--Recreational activities. 3. Aged--Recreation.

4. Recreational therapy for the aged. I. Title.

RA999.R42P67 1999

362.1'6--dc21

99-11374
CIP

INTRODUCTION

Communication is an activity most of us engage in every day without much conscious deliberation. It fulfills one of our most significant needs: to express ourselves in response to others. Communication is a circular process of looking, listening, interpreting and then responding. During social interactions we share both verbal and nonverbal cues.

Depending upon our personality, we may become more aware of and more comfortable with one type of communication channel (eye contact, voice sounds, facial expressiveness, etc.) over others. This, then, becomes our preferred way of creating and responding to messages. As an example, if you are more sensitive to visual stimuli, you are likely to retain “eye pictures” longer in your memory, and may find yourself repeating such things as “I see what you mean,” or “I get the picture,” or “Can you visualize that?” You begin to feel more satisfied if people convey messages to you using your preferred communication channel.

This book is all about communication. It provides basic insights into the various forms of the world’s most common interpersonal activity, but it is much more: it also offers a wealth of specific suggestions for activities that can be used in one-on-one or group communication settings as in residential facilities for the elderly. However, activities can be adjusted for use in other settings and with other population groups. For example, intergenerational activities can be used to introduce members within a church or school or for social gatherings where people come together for effective conversations. The goal of such activities is to initiate,

increase, and enhance communication and to have fun doing it!

For many tomorrows, the number of older people will be more prominent in our lives. The frail elderly will continue to move into and through our institutional care systems. They will surely make greater demands on resources, energy, and staff creativity; while their basic need for a responsive communication partner will remain strong. We would all benefit by prominently displaying on our wall this statement by Malcolm Cowley (1980) from his book, *The View From 80*:

To enter the country of old age is a new experience, different from what you supposed it to be. Nobody, man or woman, knows the country until he has lived in it and has taken out his citizenship papers.

PERSONAL IDENTITY

In many long-term care facilities, there is insufficient interest to separate the personal “seed” stories that help create an older person's identity. Time, like the school-room's chalk, has left its mark on all of us. However, institutional living sometimes becomes a struggle for many older residents to keep their personal identity from slipping away. One way to get to know an older person is through responsive communication and recall of their past through reminiscence activity. Chapter IX provides an in-depth perspective on the very important topic of reminiscence.

Although all memories are not positive, the older person usually welcomes recall of the past. Listeners during the communication process should not prevent an exchange of negative as well as positive experiences. All are valuable in getting to know the older individual. Just as parents and teachers were early role models, later, in facilities established for the elderly, others now act as communication models and conversation partners.

Each person's life has been compared to a daisy. What is seen outwardly (when people take the time to look) is a spoke of white petals representing the visible manifestation of the person's lifestyle and behavior. Each petal is connected to a center cluster of minute, golden seed-heads representing individual experiences. Each seed-head is distinctive, yet together represent one central image. It takes time to uncover the middle cluster, and still more time to understand how each seed-head represents an important part of the person's life experience.

The President of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education has written, "One grows old with a history—a history of interactions across the generations . . ." (Ansello, 1991). Therefore, a videotaped record of a resident or potential resident can be encouraged. The film might include the person speaking and functioning in the home environment, and a chronological display of the past as reflected through family photographs and artifacts. Once in the long-term facility, videotape equipment could be made available to volunteers to use as a current record of the older individual and their adjustment for family members.

To assist an activity director to accomplish goals, the family, program leaders, staff and volunteers can be drawn into planning. Chapter V will explore ideas to enlarge activity support and involvement. It is said that the difference between an optimist and a pessimist is that an optimist goes to the window each morning and says, "Good Morning, God!" and the pessimist goes to the window and says, "Good God, Morning!" As people who work with the elderly, we can continue to work to find the lighter side of situations in order to brighten the lives of older people. The best way to share your activity involvement is through communication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was inspired by some wonderful older people who believe in the value of communication as a creative outlet in old age. To keep them and all of us involved, I encourage you to try the activities and interaction exercises included. Involvement with others strengthens our commitment to one another at any age.

My thanks to Glenda Bixler for her assistance and encouragement.

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Chapter 1

COMMUNICATING WITH THE AGING

Age is not important unless you're a cheese.
—Helen Hayes

ADAPTATION

From the moment we are born we begin to change. Our physical self takes on a new form and in normal aging our mental capacities are waiting to be stimulated. We begin to adapt to our surroundings establishing effective behavior patterns to move us from one life stage to another. Life becomes a continual process of adaptation to change.

Confronted by a large number of diminished capacities associated with aging, many older Americans find themselves in need of extra caregiving which is most commonly handled by a female. Many women in middle or old age assume the responsibility of caring for an older relative at the same time they are pursuing a career and/or taking care of a spouse and/or their own children. It is estimated a woman will spend eighteen years of her life raising her children and almost the same length of time caregiving an older parent. This situation has led to the descriptive term, "sandwich generation." The term refers to people caught in the middle between significant others who need assistance at different stages in their lives; e.g., a female caregiver who gets squeezed between younger and older generations who need her.

When caregiving for an older person becomes excessive and is viewed as an impossible burden for any number of “good” reasons, institutional care may be considered a viable alternative. During this time feelings of guilt and obligation may accompany a reluctance to turn over the care of the person to an outside family source. Special attention must be given to ways communication can be employed to assist both the older person and others involved in the older person’s care.

FIRST CONTACTS

Before the older person is placed in a new environment, he or she is often brought to the area as an aid to general orientation. Whenever the first personal interview takes place its significance cannot be overlooked. Some nonverbal researchers have suggested that the impact of an interpersonal message is communicated primarily by the nonverbal rather than the verbal cues transmitted. These cues may include the posture of a person, the type, frequency and intensity of gestures, the type and duration of eye behavior, the type of voice quality and the use of pauses displayed. In a 1955 study, Sainsbury suggested that during an interview situation, gestures of individuals increased in proportion to the level of perceived stress reactions during the communication, even though the person’s body seemed to be at rest. In other interview studies when a person felt anger and depression, an increase in leg and head movements seemed to occur. These are clearly nonverbal cues that the body displays unconsciously and can reveal emotional states. Watch for such cues when an older person is being interviewed.

Facial Cues

Individuals are instructed to search for nonverbal clues in a person's face to discover their true feelings. However, nonverbal communication research also suggests that in our culture many people have learned to be facial liars. They know how to manipulate the face so that facial messages are controlled by seemingly indifferent facial expressions. Limb movements and muscular tensions in the body are often more accurate representations of a person's feelings than a face is. With older persons, poor vision may make it difficult to observe another person's face and read their emotions accurately. In addition, being placed in a wheelchair or holding on to a walker may also increase the inability to focus on a conversational partner's face.

Body Cues

The body is like a mirror. It unconsciously absorbs another person's movements and reflects our psychological responses to that person and their message. For instance, when feeling positive toward someone, we tend to incline our posture toward the person to seek more directness and a closer connection. The communication term for this is congruence or echoic posture. When we imitate another's posture, this represents a nonverbal compliment directed toward the person. In contrast, if two people's bodies have dissimilar postural displays we assume that communicators are either unresponsive to one another or sense a perceived inequality of status. Make a simple observation of two people talking together. Regard it as an opportunity to see how the posture of one person reflects a similar or dissimilar attitude toward their partner. Remember: some nonverbal cues "speak" louder than words!

4. Collect pussywillows and other dried flowers. Associate preserving pressed flowers and plants in books, with specific memories and potpourri uses.

5. Invite a florist, plant expert, or art teacher to demonstrate their methods. Have them bring along samples so residents can handle or create pressed flowers themselves.

6. With vegetable and flower seeds, show a stage-by-stage development and get seed pods for all residents to care for.

7. Using dried apples and other products, find a craftsperson who will demonstrate or teach "how to" use dried fruits as crafts.

8. Collect rocks from different areas and have a rock collector or geologist bring samples for everyone to handle. Add a quiz or contest to identify the rocks by type. Pair this activity with a guided tour of an area or a photo display of rocks.

9. Present a series of nature or outdoor slides and invite residents to offer their personal experiences and ideas about each one. Use as reminiscence "triggers" to elicit individual responses and recollections.

10. Distribute either the same fruit or flower or different fruits or flowers to everyone, have them draw the object from the outside, then from the inside (removing any outer covering or petals) examining the object in detail. Discuss the final evolution of the object as it begins from a seed.

11. Check video stores for travel films and any documentaries about natural earth movements.

12. Schedule a group television viewing of a nature program, and have a discussion of the program topic.