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Visiting a loved one in the Nursing Home

Sometimes the best therapy in the world is a visit from a loved one. Unfortunately, visits can sometimes be an emotional challenge for family members - and instead of tackling the challenge, too often they give up altogether.

Successful visiting is like any other social skill - it can be improved upon with a little bit of work and some practice. The payoff will be more enjoyable visits for both you and your resident. Consider these tips for better visiting:

- Plan ahead. You can help avoid the “duty” visit by remembering why you used to visit your relative *before* she became a resident. Then fill the visit with similar activities. If you shared a passion for jigsaw puzzles, bring one along and help them get it started. If you're both big readers, start a book aloud that you can read a chapter out of each time you visit.

Write letters for them, take out to lunch, meet their new friends, or brag about the kids - with report cards, photographs, school projects, and even videotapes.

- Remember this is a visit to your family member's new home, not a hospital room. Fill the visit with things you felt comfortable doing before she entered the home. Touch, if it feels natural to do so, and talk as you used to. Ask your family member for a tour of the home. Don't feel pressured to entertain; instead, if able, let them be host/hostess to you.
- Don't fear reminiscing. Gerontologists are showing that such “life review” is an important adjustment mechanism that helps elderly people put their situation into perspective and deal with lingering conflicts.
- Remember you're an important link to the outside world. Keep them involved in the family, the community, and the church. Don't be afraid to seek the same amount of advice and comfort from them as you did before she moved into the home.

Sometimes you'll have to let them vent their anger and frustration at the situation, and at their new limitations. But remember, you don't have to remedy the problem in order to be of some help, you just have to listen.

- Get to know the staff. These care providers are part of the extended family that constantly works to improve the overall quality of life for your loved one. Fill them in on your family's favorite stories about your resident, and about her personal idiosyncrasies, to help them understand the individual needs. Volunteer to help in the facility's group activities to get better acquainted.

