

The COVID-19 pandemic presents special challenges to those caring for a loved one with dementia. As our states begin opening, you may be facing new challenges with planning and implementing a visit to your loved one in a care facility after several weeks or months apart. You may be concerned about possible changes in your loved one's cognitive abilities and behaviors, and you may be anticipating challenges with implementing hygiene and social distancing recommendations during your visit. Consider the following strategies for successful visits with your loved one in residential care with COVID-19 restrictions:

Preparing for your visit:

- ❖ Check with the facility regarding their procedures for managing COVID-19 risk and supporting you during your visit.
 - How long will the visit be?
 - Where will the visit take place? How will it be set up?
 - Will staff supervise the visit?
 - How many people can be involved in the visit?
- ❖ Talk with facility staff before the visit about changes in your loved one during the quarantine to prepare yourself and get their input on how to handle the visit.
 - What changes have the staff observed in your loved one's behavior and cognition?
 - How does the staff think that your loved one will tolerate the visit? Do they have any concerns?
 - How are the visits being explained to residents?
 - How does the staff plan to end the visits?
- ❖ Be flexible about your expectations for the visit.
 - Enter with an open mind. Your first several visits during COVID-19 may look and feel very different from your visits in the past due to restrictions in place and due to the time you've needed to spend away.

- Take a pause. Be aware of any expectations or agenda you have for the visit and consider setting that aside for now. Be willing to observe and adjust in order to meet your loved one as they are today.
- ❖ Based on what you know of your loved one and what you observe during initial visits, you can advocate for the circumstances and environment that work best for your visit. For example, there may be an option to visit during a better time of day, to move somewhere more quiet or less sunny.

Tips for your visits:

- ❖ It's helpful to read the situation and greet your friend or family member accordingly. Depending on your loved one's current cognitive abilities and preferences, you may need to place yourself squarely in their line of vision to get their attention and adjust the volume of or simplify your communication.
 - Plan to introduce yourself, even if your loved one remembers you, as it can be difficult to recognize someone with a face covering.
 - Be aware of your body language and make good eye contact to connect positively with your loved one.
 - Choose your face covering with care. Some people with dementia have an easier time with face masks that are clear in the area of the lips. Face coverings with words or intricate designs may be distracting.
- ❖ Visits may initially be confusing or distressing for your loved one, and it may be helpful to limit the duration. Experiment to find what amount of time works best.

- ❖ If verbal communication is difficult, it is still meaningful to connect during a visit. Try playing music, singing together, reciting a meaningful poem or text, looking at large photos if vision allows, or just providing a warm greeting and words of reassurance.
- ❖ Your loved one may be confused and distraught about the lapse of time since they've last seen you. How should you respond?
 - Consider your loved one's ability to understand and remember information that you share.
 - Depending on their ability to understand and remember, it may be very confusing, upsetting, and not helpful to be retold the details of COVID-19 several times.
 - Instead, respond to questions in whatever way will be most comfortable and easy-to-understand in the moment. You might explain the basic facts, or you might say something reassuring, even if not entirely true or factual, like "I've been out of town for work, I've missed you. I'm so glad to see you today!"
- ❖ Your loved one may have difficulty observing the restrictions of the visits, especially the inability to touch one another and the requirement to wear facing coverings.
 - Do your best, using the tips above, knowing that total compliance may not be realistic.
 - Discuss guidelines with the facility staff in advance for support.
 - Stay calm if your loved one violates one of the recommendations.
 - Use gentle reminders and humor, if appropriate, to encourage compliance with your loved one.

Tips for you:

- ❖ Offer yourself compassion during times of stress and difficulty. Prioritize self-care activities, reach out to your friends and family, and consider one of our caregiver support groups or educational programs.
- ❖ It may be helpful to debrief with a trusted friend or support about how these initial visits feel for you.
- ❖ If you have concerns about your loved one's care, contact the state ombudsman.
 - Massachusetts: (617) 727-7750
 - New Hampshire: (603) 271-4375
- ❖ To consult about your unique situation, and to learn more about our programs and services, contact our 24/7 Helpline at 800-272-3900.

All information provided by the Alzheimer's Association Massachusetts/New Hampshire Chapter