

DEMENTIA AND COVID

A few months ago, COVID-19 and Quarantine were terms that meant nothing to the average person. Now these words, and the guidelines that go with them, are all too familiar. As a healthcare worker in a long-term care facility, COVID has been so much more than an inconvenience beyond, ‘when I will be able to go to the grocery store.’

Working in long-term care involves caring for individuals with varying levels of cognitive decline. The changes COVID has brought is hard for anyone to understand. For those in healthcare facilities, such as Providence Health Care, they are simply inconceivable. At PHC, we work hard to keep our residents and employees physically and emotionally well. This commitment requires different approaches for different people. We care for many residents with cognitive brain changes, this means they have memory problems or show signs of dementia. We recognize their special needs and do our best to meet them. One of the ways we meet these needs is by utilizing the Positive Approach to Care pioneered by Teepa Snow. Staff have been trained on the best way to interact with residents with cognitive brain changes, and we want to share some of our tips with you.

When talking with a loved one that has cognitive brain changes, we recommend not correcting them. If we stop to think about it, they aren’t even confused until we show up and correct them. No matter how many times we correct them we can’t fix the fact that they are dealing with memory loss and confusion. We have to be the one to change. Does it physically hurt them, you, or anyone else living there? If the answer to these questions is no, then simply let it go. Allowing them to choose means respecting their dignity. When they are potentially causing harm, you could give them a reason that they would understand. If they do not accept that, you can keep changing the answer until you find the one that makes them happy. This may be a lie, but that is ok. You need to live in their truth and try to focus on who they were in the distant past, not the recent past. Remember that they have short-term memory loss.

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Keep in mind that your loved one doesn't understand COVID, and they don't know what it means. Maybe instead of continually explaining the virus, we should stop talking about it. We should consider bringing them joy by talking about something else. Ask yourself what brings joy to your loved one and focus on what that is. To do this, we need to consider their background and truly get into their world. Think back to something they enjoyed during their childhood and recreate that moment or atmosphere. COVID could be looked at as an opportunity to bring your loved one joy in a unique and different way rather than as a challenge. This change could create better understanding with your loved one and build a stronger bond.

The last, but probably most important bit of advice, is to quit trying to change them. Our loved ones are who they are now. This may not be what we pictured, but regardless of what we have in mind, things are different. We should stop trying to change our loved ones with cognitive brain changes and should be the ones to change ourselves.

It is time to start asking what we can do to help our loved ones and not what we can't do.

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