

## COMMUNICATION CONNECTION

## # 2--MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT



**There is a difference between Religiosity and Spirituality**--they should not be considered the same thing in looking at meaningful engagement with persons with dementia. In providing care to our clients/residents, we are “tending to their garden.” In considering Thomas Kitwood’s work on “personhood”<sup>i</sup> we can visualize the components as a beautiful flower. At the centre of this flower of “personhood” is **LOVE** and the petals are those things we consider to make persons feel special and whole: comfort, identity, occupation, inclusion, attachment, and **HOPE** (not mentioned on our fireside chat)

People with dementia need someone to connect with regardless of stage in their journey. For example, think of your **best friend**. It might be your spouse, a girlfriend, a boyfriend, son, daughter, partner and so on. **Describe** what is special about your relationship with this **best friend** -- perhaps this best friend has a “shared history” with you and it only takes one word to begin a conversation and both of you can go to that special place in that shared history; best friends “understand you”; best friends are a “**witness to your life**”.<sup>ii</sup>

Some suggestions on how to **engage** persons in meaningful engagement include, but are not limited to: **Touch**, hand-holding, a hand on a shoulder, **music** (especially hymns), **visual cuing** using items that are of significance to that person, **photos**, working with and enjoying favorite **food**, **treats**, repeating and reminiscing of distant/familiar **memories**, and opportunities to express **creativity** (music, art, dance).

Tips to help engage persons with dementia meaningfully in activities:

- 1) Remember to go at the pace of the person and set aside your own agenda
- 2) Look for the familiar to persons with dementia according to age and stage – for example, some may recognize music (especially older hymns) and activities from a different era than we might (eg. 1920's, 1930's or 1940's)
- 3) Not all family cares for one another in the same way -- they may care just differently. Build on the strengths of those important relationships
- 4) Strategies for meaningful engagement might include; journaling, interactive worship services (e.g., A verse from the bible recited by participants in the service)
- 5) Look for ways as a caregiver to learn special things about another person's religion, beliefs, spirituality or favorite things to pass the time or to eat, especially during festive seasons in their culture

Other references:

DVD--“Away from Her” Director Sarah Polle  
Presentation by Frances Morton, MHSc, Spirituality and Dementia: Meaningful Engagement, Nov. 16/07

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<sup>i</sup> Kitwood, T. (1997). *Dementia Reconsidered: The Person Comes First*. Philadelphia, PA: Oxford University Press.

<sup>ii</sup> For more information on the Best Friends Approach to Care please see Bell, V. & Troxel, D. (2003). *The Best Friends Approach to Alzheimer's Care*. Baltimore, MA: Health Professions Press.