

Tips for Building a Culture of Peer Support



Providing opportunities for residents with to support and help one another is an excellent daily intervention and preventative treatment to address unmet needs¹ (Cohen-Mansfield, 2013). Peer support has a significant impact on loneliness and depression and yet we rarely include this concept in programs.

One of the key points in doing this for those with more advanced dementia is to watch for their preference cues and to facilitate simple positive interactions with their peers. This makes it possible to explore what is meaningful and enjoyable and give as much control as possible.^{2,3} (Knight, Haslam, & Haslam, 2010; Zeisel, 2009).

So although residents with more advanced dementia are not able to communicate their choices verbally, they provide other distinct cues that indicate their preferences⁴ (Power, 2010), and focusing on these cues can prevent them from being overlooked⁵ (Sherwin & Winsby, 2011).

Below are 7 simple actions that exemplify a shift in focus from passivity to social productivity and peer support. Residents helping residents. When we invite them to come with us to help another resident, it becomes possible and simple.

Make it a daily activity program. By doing this, we are helping them help one another every single day.

7 Ways You Can help Residents with Dementia help their Peers

1. **Express kindness to another resident.** How? ... invite the resident to come with you to say hello to another resident. Offer a simple handshake or a hug if it feels appropriate. Other offerings can include things like getting them a coffee, a flower, or ice cream. Invite them to join you both for a walk if they are able.
2. **Express sincere appreciation.** Encourage the resident you are with to express any appreciative thoughts about another in their presence. Model it. We often think appreciative thoughts but don't voice them. (Continued...)

7 Ways You Can help Residents with Dementia help their Peers (Cont'd)



3. Take time to listen to a fellow resident. Do your best to listen to what other people say. Try to be present when others are speaking. Make a point of looking into their eyes and listening to their words, ...nod your head, it makes a world of difference. The resident with you will be encouraged to do the same.

4. Check on someone who is struggling with something or who is ill. Showing support to someone, especially if they are struggling, lonely or isolated, is important. Go visit them with a resident, show concern and care, bring them flowers if you can or a treat they might like.

5. Volunteer in some way that is needed in your community. Along with a resident, go see a department head or staff member, and ask if there is something they could use help with.

6. Nurture talent to give to others. If you notice that someone has a talent that they aren't putting to use, let them know, you've noticed. Gently encourage them, and offer suggestions of where they can share their talent, e.g. decorate the bare walls. Do this as a project together.

7. Find a quote that inspires and offer it to someone. Create a basket of inspiring quotes. Invite a resident to choose one, and then go together to find someone who is lonely or struggling and pass it on. Residents helping residents.

References

- ¹Cohen-Mansfield, J., Golander, H., Arnhem, G., & Cohen, R. (2014). Reactions and interventions for delusions in nursing home residents with dementia. *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias*, *In press*. doi: 10.1177/1533317514522850
- ²Knight, C., Haslam, S. A., & Haslam, C. (2010). In home or at home? How collective decision making in a new care facility enhances social interaction and wellbeing amongst older adults. *Ageing & Society*, *30*(08), 1393-1418. doi: 10.1017/S0144686X10000656
- ³Zeisel, J. (2009). *I'm still here: A breakthrough approach to understanding someone living with Alzheimer's*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- ⁴Power, G. A. (2010). *Dementia Beyond Drugs: Changing the Culture of Care*. Baltimore: Health Professions Press, Inc.
- ⁵Sherwin, S., & Winsby, M. (2011). A relational perspective on autonomy for older adults residing in nursing homes. *Health Expectations*, *14*(2), 182-190. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1369-7625.2010.00638.x>