

Evidence-based caregiving

by Lorena Tonarelli

Coping with the loss of a resident

Providing residents with loving end-of-life care and remembering them after their death helps nursing home caregivers better cope with grief, a European study says.

Participants in the study, conducted by the National University of Ireland, were seven nursing home caregivers with up to 15 years of experience in caring for older people.

They say caregivers' ability to cope with the grief caused by the loss of a resident partly depends on how well they care for the resident during their life's final journey.

The more effort caregivers put into providing appropriate end-of-life care and ensuring the resident has a dignified death, the easier it will be for them to overcome their grief.

Provide tender, loving companionship

In addition to ensuring residents are comfortable, safe, and pain free, caregivers should become tender and loving companions to them.

In the study, published June 30, 2011, in the *International Journal of Older People Nursing*, "participants spoke fondly of 'jigging about' with the lady who loved Irish music, or singing badly to another lady who liked the sound of her voice," says Dr. Maura Dowling, the study's lead researcher.

This is possible, she adds, only if caregivers know their residents well in all "their own little peculiarities... likes, dislikes and fears," and open up themselves to the residents about their own personality, family, children and so on.

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Reassuring presence

Caregivers should try and be with a dying resident as much as possible.

Even if the resident seems confused or not to understand what is happening around them "...the touch and the feel of the presence of somebody else there, is very important to them," says one nurse.

This is especially true if the resident's family cannot be present.

Family involvement

If there are relatives, caregivers should make sure these have free access to the resident's room, so they can visit their loved one anytime they wish.

This, says Dowling, is very important because it helps create a reassuring, home-like atmosphere.

Providing a single room to the resident is also recommended; it gives privacy and prevents the negative effect that witnessing death can have on other residents.

After the resident's death

When the resident eventually dies, caregivers may experience a great sense of loss.

There are two ways, in particular, to help alleviate this feeling.

One is to think of the resident's death as a celebration of life, rather than a negative event.

The other is to keep the resident's memory alive, for example, by

- talking about the deceased elder with colleagues and other residents,
- recalling things the resident has done or said,
- visiting the resident's grave, and
- organizing a remembrance day, once a year, for the resident's family to attend.

If there is no family

When a resident dies and there is no family or connection to one, you and a few coworkers may want to consider organizing the resident's funeral within the home.

On one occasion, some of the nurses in the study were able to organize everything, including a mass and choir. This was highly therapeutic for them, for it led to feelings of pride and satisfaction.

One of them recalls: "I was quite proud because without being prompted... all the staff from the ward, and many from here, went to the resident's funeral and walked behind the coffin up to the graveyard... were it not for the staff and the priest, there would have been no one else there."

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