

(An Inservice Training Article. Quiz p. 12)

What makes a compassionate caregiver, and how to become one

by Lorena Tonarelli, M.Sc.
Care Guide
Research Reporter

Compassion is an essential element of good nursing, and can be learned, enabling caregivers to improve patient quality of life and experience greater job satisfaction.

At the heart of nursing is one special quality: Compassion.

All caregivers need to have this quality.

But, while some may have the natural ability to convey compassion to those in their care, others need help and time to become skilled at this.

Fortunately, compassion can be learned.

There isn't just one way to do this. Evidence shows classes, on-the-job training, print and online educational material, videos, and workshops all are helpful. But one element is key to success.

New research in the *Journal of Nursing Management* looked at studies conducted, between 1998 and 2010, on nurses who attended compassionate care training.

It found that all student nurses initially learned how to be compassionate. But, everything changed when, as part of the training, they started "shadowing" a senior nurse.

Student nurses assigned to an uncompassionate senior nurse failed to become compassionate themselves, unlike those assigned to a compassionate senior nurse, all of whom became compassionate.

"The caring nurse is not just a skilled technician who follows protocols... but someone who also exhibits attributes such as honesty, respect, compassion, wisdom and sensitivity."

Student nurses assigned to an uncompassionate senior nurse failed to become compassionate themselves, unlike those assigned to a compassionate senior nurse, all of whom became compassionate.



The compassionate nurse

But how do you recognize a caring, compassionate nurse from one who isn't?

Dr. Gudrun Rudolfsson, of University West, in Sweden, says:

"The caring nurse is not just a skilled technician who follows protocols... but is someone who also exhibits attributes such as honesty, respect, compassion, wisdom and sensitivity."

Caring, compassionate nurses see those they care for as human beings.

They consider their patients' emotions when providing care; and do their utmost to alleviate their suffering.

The uncompassionate nurse

Uncompassionate nurses, on the other hand, focus more on completing their tasks in a timely manner.

They are more task-oriented, and lack genuine concern for their patients' happiness and wellbeing.

Some may even have what Rudolfsson calls a "cynical attitude."

They doubt the reasons why patients seek their help. They often complain about patients being a burden, and treat them insensitively.

Why compassion matters

Compassion is central to good nursing for many, well-researched reasons. These are summarized in the journal *Nursing Times*:

- Patients cared for by compassionate nurses are more likely to share problems and concerns.

As a result, health issues are identified and treated early, leading to better recovery.

- Compassionate caregiving has been shown to lower patients' anxiety and, in turn, increase the speed with which patients heal.

Patients consider a compassionate attitude the most desirable attribute of a nurse, and the single most important factor for determining whether or not they are satisfied with the care received.



- Dementia-related agitated behaviors are reduced in health-care settings that promote compassion.
- Nurses' job satisfaction, on the other hand, is enhanced, potentially improving retention.
- Patients consider a compassionate attitude the most desirable attribute of a nurse, and the single most important factor for determining whether or not they are satisfied with the care received.

And this, of course, has an impact on a facility's patient satisfaction scores.

Patients consider a compassionate attitude the most desirable attribute of a nurse

Putting it into practice

So far so good, but how do you actually deliver compassion to those in your care?

What are the specific techniques you need to use every day? More than a decade of research has been conducted on this.

Following are some of the highlights.

Address basic needs

Start by taking care of your elders' basic needs.

- With everything you do, do it with a warmhearted smile, polite manners, and good eye contact.
- Keep them clean, well dressed, comfortable and free from pain.
- If they need help with something, don't let them wait.
- Check on them often during the day.
- If you say you will come back later, keep your promise.
- Give them choices.
- Maintain their dignity.

Be sensitive

Consider that your elders have special needs compared to younger patients.

Most have hearing, vision or other impairments, and need more time to do things, understand information and answer questions.

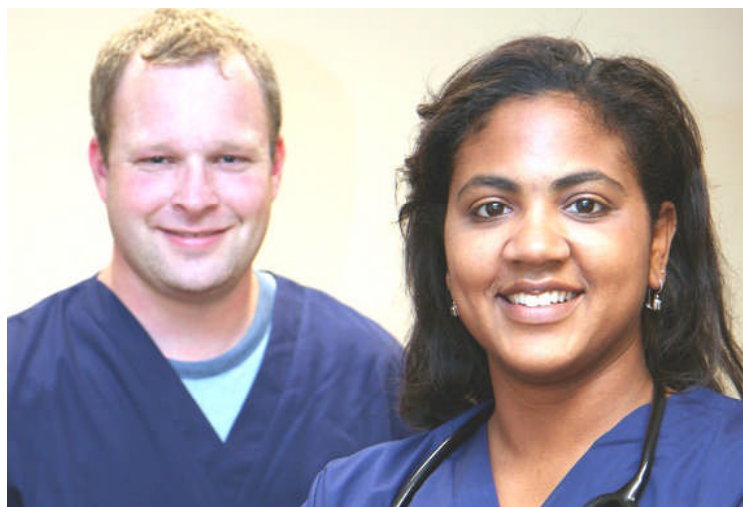
Consider that your elders have special needs compared to younger patients.

Slow down when doing things with your elders! Be patient with them. Enjoy being with them.



(Compassion, cont'd next page)

With everything you do, do it with a warmhearted smile, polite manners, and good eye contact.



As a compassionate caregiver, you must be sensitive to these needs.

- Try and talk a little more slowly.
- Don't rush them.
- Be patient. And just enjoy the time you share with them.

Use touch

Elders also have a particular need for human touch.

And, used appropriately, simple acts like holding their hand or gently stroking their arm, to provide comfort and reassurance, go a long way in addressing this need.

Knowing your elders well is important, for some may not want to be touched, due to personal circumstances, beliefs or past experiences.

For example, in some cultures, being touched by someone who is not a relative is considered unacceptable.

Know them well

In fact, getting to know your elders is paramount to all aspects of care.

It is one of the most important compassionate caregiving techniques of all.

Because the more you know patients, the easier it is to value them as persons.

And it just comes natural to treat them in a loving, compassionate way.

So, don't be afraid to ask your elders about their past life and themselves.

What things do they like? How many children and grandchildren do they have? Were they in the war? Where did they work? Do they have particular interests or hobbies?

You can gain a lot of this information through friendly conversations with your elders... which you should undertake all the time.

They love to talk, and reminisce, and this is an important part of your caregiving, as it significantly improves their quality of life.

Elders also have a particular need for human touch.



They'll feel good!

Remember, elders love talking about their younger days and their families.

So, you will not simply collect valuable information enabling the provision of the best possible person-centered care.

You will also make them feel good about themselves, loved and very much important.

This also applies to elders with a dementia illness, like Alzheimer's disease.

Most retain the ability to share information about themselves, especially if prompted with family photos and objects from their past.

Be with them

Obviously, you need to be with your elders to get to know them well.

That's why it is important that you spend as much time as possible with them.

Stop by as often as you can. Ask them how they are doing, see if there is something you can do for them, and give them a nice compliment.

You may also want to start a conversation on a common interest.

Perhaps, for example, you both like gardening. Then, ask them for some tips. They will be overjoyed to help!

Make little things happen

You do this with simple loving acts that make your elders happier.

Bathe them using their preferred method.

Make sure the picture of a loved one is always at hand.

Place a small vase with their favorite flowers by their bedside. Hang their grandchildren's artworks on the bedroom's wall.

There are endless ways to put a smile on your elders' face. Be creative.

Find out what they love – and make it happen!

And be a good team member

Finally, consider that if you have good, caring relationships with all members of the healthcare team, you are more likely to be caring and compassionate with those in your care as well.

Don'ts

There are also things you should avoid doing, if you want to be a compassionate caregiver. For example, you should never:

- Act in a disrespectful or angry way; Always be kind.
- Talk down to your elders or treat them like objects.
- Ignore them, or look distracted, when you provide care.
- Dismiss their concerns or feelings as unimportant.
- Be judgmental of their opinions and beliefs.
- Be an 'absent' listener; listen carefully to everything your elders say.

Hugely rewarding!

Compassion is the essence of good nursing.

It is a desire to develop caring, affectionate relationships with your elders, based on complete unconditional love.... as well as respect, kindness and consideration.

Compassion is the essence of good nursing.

Turning this desire into actions requires the consistent use of many different, specific caregiving techniques.

It may seem like hard work. But all it requires is a warm and friendly personality. And the results can be hugely rewarding.

Your elders will experience a better quality of life and less suffering. And you'll find your job more enjoyable and satisfying.

Be a happy, friendly caregiver. Put a smile on your elders' faces!



(Inservice Quiz p. 12)

Exercise delays loss of fitness in diabetes, may prevent early disability and death

Most people with diabetes have the type 2 form of the disease.

It occurs when the body can't use insulin efficiently, a substance it normally produces to prevent the sugar in our blood from building up to unhealthy levels.

If you are caring for elders with type 2 diabetes, make sure they engage in some form of physical activity every day, such as walking, for at least 20 minutes.

This simple intervention will help delay early disability and death due to accelerated loss of fitness, say researchers.

Our fitness depends on how well the heart and circulatory systems work, and slowly declines with age. Normally, we lose 10 percent of fitness every 10 years, after the age of 40 or 50.

Exercise helps delay early disability and death

Exercise improves the fitness of those with type 2 diabetes by up to 40 percent!

But those with type 2 diabetes lose their fitness at a 20 percent faster rate.

This means they are at greater risk of developing impairments in everyday activities and walking, as well as dying, much earlier than non diabetics.

But, exercising regularly can help prevent this from happening, says Dr. Amy Huebschmann, from the University of Colorado School of Nursing.

Huebschmann found that exercise improves the fitness of those with type 2 diabetes by up to 40 percent, within three to five months, increasing their chances of an independent, longer life.



She concludes: "Type 2 diabetes has a significant negative impact on health, but that impact can be improved with as simple an intervention as regular brisk walking or other physical activity that most people with diabetes can do."

The findings were presented at the 2012 meeting of the American Physiological Society, at Westminster, Colorado.