Transitioning to Residential Aged Care

Think about the last time you moved house and all the planning and preparation you had to do leading up to the big day. Now imagine that you can’t take any of those precious things with you, and no one listened to you when you protested.

1. Transitioning from the familiar to the unknown is a great challenge

“Here I realise that I do not have a home anymore…Now I have been institutionalized (sic) in the nursing home, everything is gone…Here, you are in a waiting room for death…This is a new phase, tears are falling.” (Riedl, Mantovan & Them; 2013)*

This is a very confronting quote, but unfortunately it is the reality for many older people when first entering aged care. Older people living in residential aged care are 50% more likely to have depression than those receiving care in their own home. As front line staff, you can have a huge impact on improving their transition experience. This is a guide to assist you in making the most of the time you have to care for them.

- Relationship building is really important, and it takes time.
- Introduce yourself and your role. You may have to do this a few times! New residents are meeting many new people every day, and it can make them quite anxious being surrounded by so many unknown faces.
- If a resident is not coping, it can also be a highly stressful time for you as a carer. It is important that you do not take someone’s resistance to care personally.

2. Help new residents settle into their new home

Home is where one creates meaning; a safe haven, a place where we keep our worldly possessions and spend time with loved ones. Layers of memory are created that give us a sense of who we are and where we belong.

- Many older people express feelings of homelessness and helplessness when first moving into residential aged care.
- Many people experience a great deal of loss in the transition, such as their dignity, independence and identity.
- Freedom to make decisions about their life becomes limited.
- Adjusting to transition is different for everyone and there is a need to consider the additional needs of people who have been told they can no longer live at home, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people who live in rural or remote areas, people who are financially or socially disadvantaged, people who are veterans, or the spouse of widow of a veteran, people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, care leavers, people from LGBTI communities, people living with dementia, people approaching the end of life,
people receiving palliative care and people with mental health issues. Refer to pages 11-13 in the National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care for more information on these diverse groups.

- It's really important that you respect the other person's private space. The most commonly reported issue older people have in aged care is the lack of privacy. Remember to knock and request entry into their room every time.
- At first, other residents are strangers and the new resident may be fearful approaching new people. Other residents have an important role to play in being welcoming and inclusive. Some people do not join new groups easily. Consider a buddy program to assist; this may make the transition smoother.
- Ask what you could do to make the older person more comfortable. Sometimes this may be as simple as being surrounded by some significant and familiar belongings from home. Find out how your organisation can support this.
- Acknowledge the negative perception of aged care facilities the resident may have.
- Listen to their experience and treat it with deep respect. This may be hard for you to hear if the older person is being 'negative'.
- You could say: Yes, change is hard. How can I make this easier for you? Look for the older person's strengths, have they shown courage? Have they been patient in the experience? Let them know!

3. Relationships and family

- Relationships with family can change dramatically during this time. Older people often fear they will be forgotten and their voices won't be heard. You could say: Tell me about your relationship with your family or How have your family supported you though this difficult time?
- Be mindful of those who do not have a strong support network.
- Many residents will want to protect their family from additional stress, and not tell them about their struggles. This means that it is even more important for you as a carer to be the friendly face they can confide in.

4. Respond to difficult questions – “Have I had a good life?”

Transition is a critical time. It is common for older people to think about death and reflect on the quality of the life they have lived. They may think about regrets and guilt from the past, and seek forgiveness for themselves or others. Much of this is about tying up loose ends. Many new residents will come to the realisation that they have arrived in a place where they may die, which can be quite a shock.

- Are you noticing patterns in conversation? Look for red flags of emotional and spiritual distress: challenging behaviours, refusing care and not engaging with other residents.
- You could ask: What's on your mind? Or Tell me more about what that's like for you… Or What do you find yourself thinking about the most?
- For many older people, there is a lot of fear and anxiety about the future. They will often ask, What will happen to me when I die? You could say: What do you think will happen? Or What do you hope for? Or What do your beliefs say will happen?
- Ask if they share their worries with others. Is he or she comfortable with sharing these thoughts with friends and family? Or would the older person prefer to talk with someone outside of their circle, like a spiritual care practitioner?
- Rekindle old memories; ask them to tell you about fond times and people they love.
- It is possible that the person in your care has a religion they identify with culturally, but they are not religious. This means that the person you are caring for may not believe in God or believe what their religion says about death although they may value certain aspects of their religious customs.
- It’s important to know your own limits in these conversations. This may be when you feel uncomfortable or feel you do not have enough to say. When you take the time to listen to residents you are showing a lot of empathy, but repeat exposure to their stories and distress can also impact you. You also need to care for yourself if you find this affecting you. Turn to a colleague, your line manager or a spiritual care practitioner if you find things harder than usual. Please see our Spiritual Care Consideration: Supporting each other when a Resident/client Dies for additional information on self-care.

For more resources and links to useful reading in providing care for older people transitioning to aged care services, visit the Meaningful Ageing website Member’s Zone. With thanks to Lisa Thompson, Prescare and Jean Pierre, Baptcare for their assistance in preparing this Consideration.