Connecting with someone special

Tips and advice that can help you make a difference







Older people often become isolated in our community. Spending some time getting to know older friends, relatives or neighbours can be an enriching experience for both parties.

If you are planning to make a connection with an older person, we hope that these tips will make your time together more enjoyable and rewarding.

With time, patience and understanding, you can become someone special in the life of a special older person.

Start by listening

When you really listen carefully to what a person has to say, it is a way of saying "you are important to me and I care about you".

So taking the time to sit with an older person, and allowing them to speak at their own pace, and to say the things that are important to them, is a first step in really connecting.

Even if they sometimes repeat themselves or are a little confused, listening is essential and is often a great pleasure!

Encourage reminiscing

Like everyone else, older people need the opportunity to talk about the times when they played important roles in their family and in the community, and about significant happenings in their lives. Experts agree that it is good to encourage older people to talk about their past.

You may have noticed that many older people talk more about the distant past than about recent events. When memory is failing it is often easier to remember distant events.

It's often surprising to learn about the lives older people have lived and the experiences they have been through. You may also be able to spend time looking over their photos and albums, scrapbooks, or favourite objects that are important to them.

The 5 S's

Sometimes older people have memory problems or difficulty hearing. These tips will help you get your message across.

Slow

Slow down your rate of speech and wait for the person to respond (this can sometimes take a while).

Simple

Keep what you say **simple** - one idea at a time, using short sentences.

Specific

Talk about **specific** people, objects or events they may remember. Use names (John, Mary) instead of pronouns (he, she).

Show

Use gestures, point to items, use visual examples such as photographs, or **show** choices...if you are saying "would you like to wear the blue cardigan?", show the cardigan.

Smile

Facial expressions can be understood long after verbal language is lost. Send a message with a **smile**!

Don't rush to give advice

Most of us don't welcome unrequested advice.

Older people are no different - so it's best not to rush to give advice or express your opinion. Instead, ask them for their advice or opinions. It will help them feel they are useful and valued, and you may well be surprised at the insights and perspective that they have to offer.

You could also ask them about activities or hobbies that they were proud of - pruning the roses, fixing the car, cooking a meal. For people with failing memories, ask simple questions they may be able to answer.

Share news & information

Let your conversations become meaningful. Share news about your family, the community, and the wider world with the older person you are spending time with. Share the problems as well as pleasant or exciting events.

Older people are not too fragile to deal with sadness and death. Protecting them may make them feel left out. And usually they will have experienced many more things in their life than us.





Bring others to visit

Your older friend may enjoy meeting other members of your family and your friends. And bringing someone new along can bring a fresh new colour to your friendship. It may be fun to take photos, and bring them along as a remembrance of an enjoyable visit.

Reading together

On one of your visits you could bring some newspapers or magazines, or a couple of books.

You and your older relative or friend could look at them together, or you could both just sit and read. If your older friend is visually impaired, you could spend time reading to them. This can be a wonderful experience that creates a special bond.

Your friend may remember favourite books or stories from their youth and they will enjoy hearing them again.

Playing games

Try bringing cards, dominoes or other board games to play together. Crosswords can also be a great way to spend time. Often an activity is the best way to take some intensity out of a situation and have a laugh together.

Enjoy an excursion

Often older people, once active and mobile, have difficulty travelling short distances, even just up the street to the shops or to the beach. A drive in the car, a visit to their old neighbourhood, attendance at family affairs can be very special experiences that may be really enjoyed by older friends or relatives.

Trips to the shops, stopping off for a coffee, can become a highlight of the week. As well as a chance to stock up on essential supplies. Point out features along the way – stop to 'smell the roses'. You might enjoy moving at the slower pace!

Acknowledgements: Human Science Press NY 1977.

The Four S's were from Jillian Ball's section on Communication in Bowden, H. & Squires, B. Dealing With Dementia. A Self Study Course for Carers. Continuing Education, University of New South Wales, 1987, with further writing by Meredith Gresham

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