

Long-Term Care Survey Alert

QUALITY OF LIFE :Devise Activities That Tap the Desire to Care and Share

Research shows residents may enjoy being in the helping role.

Just because a resident is turning 100 and rarely comes out of her room anymore doesn't mean she wouldn't enjoy helping others. That's what a team of occupational therapy researchers found in a research project in which they helped the elderly woman rekindle a basic interpersonal trait: altruism.

"Humans have an urge to help other people on a regular basis," a need that some research shows people maintain as they age, says **Joseph Cipriani, EdD, OTR/L**, a professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at Misericordia University in Dallas, Pa., who oversaw graduate students there who conducted the research project.

Birthday Gifts Hit the Spot

The resident who participated in the project had historically enjoyed an active life and had performed service work in the community. She was still able to attend activities but wasn't usually interested in participating, Cipriani tells **Eli**.

Yet when approached by the researchers about participating in a project to convey her caring to others, the woman agreed. She chose to make artificial flower arrangements and greeting cards for people having a birthday in the same month she was turning 100.

Overcoming concerns: A somewhat private person, the resident didn't know many of the residents because she seldom left her room. And she worried that the other residents might not like her gifts. So the researchers did a trial run and confirmed that the residents would accept the offerings.

The researchers delivered most of the gifts crafted by the resident.

But when the resident could visit a few residents to give them their gifts, she got to mix with them in a way that she hadn't tried in the nursing facility, says Cipriani. "She noted that she found skills that she 'forgot she had.'"

Lessons learned: Identify residents who may want to participate in a community service type project by their willingness to try new things -- and whether they have participated in those kinds of efforts previously in their lives, advises **Anthony Cirillo**, a long-term care ombudsman, resident experience consultant in Huntersville, N.C.

Resident Groups Can Also Focus on Helping Others

The Misericordia University OT researchers also had success in promoting an altruistic group activity in another nursing home. In that project, they offered a selected group of eight ambulatory, communicative residents several options for helping others in the community.

What the group chose: "The group decided to make floral arrangement gift baskets to send to people getting hospice care in their homes," Cipriani relates. "The group became very consumed with the project and worked on it for weeks. Some of them hadn't been attending other activities lately but they came to the group meeting to work on the baskets."

Other options: Cipriani knows of another program where a researcher hooked up people in the community who were learning English as a second language with nursing home residents to practice their English conversational skills.

"The nursing home residents were known as conversation mentors," Cipriani says.



The project proved to be a major win-win for both groups of participants. The people learning English got to practice talking with the residents in a relaxed setting, "and consequently learned English more quickly," says Cipriani. And both groups enjoyed sharing their intergenerational experiences, he adds.