

My home life

Promoting quality in care homes for older people Issue19



WE ARE FAMILY

Working well with families in care homes

INSIDE:

Relatives' meetings – Responding to feedback – Families as your resource!

Dear Friends,

Care homes play a vital part in supporting families, especially at times of transition. Working with relatives can be rewarding, complex and at times challenging.

This bulletin celebrates the great work that managers and staff do to support families when they visit and offers some examples of good practice from relatives and staff.

Thanks for reading and please keep sending in your great stories!

The Teams at My Home Life



Acknowledgements

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England: mhl@city.ac.uk 0207 040 5776

Northern Ireland: s.penney@ulster.ac.uk
028 7167 5893

Scotland: myhomelifescotland@uws.ac.uk

Wales: suzy.webster@agecymru.org.uk
029 2043 1555



My Home Life is a UK-wide initiative that promotes quality of life and delivers positive change in care homes for older people. We work with care homes, statutory bodies, community organisations and others to co-create new ways of working to better meet the needs of older people, their relatives and staff. Our vision is a world where care homes

are great places to live, die, visit and work; where care homes are:

- Supported to deliver to their potential
- Valued and trusted by those who work with them
- Cherished by their local communities

WELCOME TO YOUR NEW HOME!



For many people, going into a care home is a major event in life that may be associated with feelings of loss, lack of control and uncertainty about the future. Relatives can also feel guilty about 'placing' their loved one in a care home, so it is often a time of emotional turmoil.

By fostering positive relationships with relatives from the start, we can help them stay connected with their loved one and build trust in the care being delivered.

Contrary to popular belief, care homes can be places of safe refuge offering new, positive beginnings. Understanding what helps residents and relatives to settle into a care home can be hugely helpful.

Here are some insights that we have gathered ... But what might relatives say works well in your care home?

An emotional rollercoaster

"It's been a month since my mother moved into a specialised dementia suite within an Essex care home. During this period I have run through a range of emotions: grief, guilt, fear, suspicion, depression, frustration. I've also experienced relief, gratitude, affection and recently perhaps, reassurance and, possibly, calm." **Julia Jones, Relative**

Improving quality of life

"My Aunt had gone from being dispirited and often withdrawn to being far more conversational, stimulated and engaging. Like she used to be." **Mary Hardcastle, Relative**

Attention to detail

"When preparing for the resident and family's arrival we try to make their room as homely as possible, putting in the ground work before the day of the move. We make sure the room is how they requested it with a copy of their favourite newspaper and fresh flowers." **Care home manager**

Reclaiming lives

"I felt a great relief letting go of the full time caring responsibilities. I could be a husband again." **Peter Griffiths, Relative**

Making time for families at the start

"The care home manager spent time with us as a family getting to know us and asking questions that built a picture of Mum - what mattered most to her in terms of her care but also as a person. That meant a lot to us." **Marianne Manser, Relative**

Building relationships, offering space

"When a new family comes to our home I know I have to go at their pace. Allowing them to breathe and relax is the most important thing after the stress of the move. It is tempting to tell the relatives about all the activities and fun we have but at the initial stage it is more important to step back a bit and keep the office door open." **Marcella Taylor, Care home manager**

WHAT MATTERS TO PEOPLE

Receiving difficult feedback positively

It is not always easy to get it right for all relatives all of the time. Sometimes it is hard to engage with feedback that might not be very positive. However, this feedback is like gold dust in helping us to better understand what matters to people and what a good experience could look like.

Here we give three examples of real situations and invite you to think about your responses to the statements. How can you invite relatives to share their experiences, talk together, share decision making and celebrate what works well?

Living with loss

“A relative came to the office and presented me with his mother’s toothpaste. He was cross, telling me that he had calculated that if care staff use a certain amount of toothpaste per day to brush his mother’s teeth, the tube should now be empty. Of course in the end it was nothing to do with the toothpaste but about a feeling of loss for his mother.” Marcella Taylor, Care home manager

- How does your care home support relatives to express their worries and concerns?
- How does your care home support relatives to express their hopes and aspirations?
- How do you work as a team to support each other when faced with complex situations that need patience and care?

Offering closeness

“One of the things I remember was the lack of places to sit with my Grandma when I visited her. I would have loved to have had the opportunity to be physically close to her again - I missed her cuddles!” Suzy, Relative

- Imagine opportunities for closeness. What do these look like?
- In what ways do you try to create an environment for closeness? What is real and possible?



Relatives as a resource to the home

“I felt like I was a potentially useful asset to the care home that they didn’t take advantage of: I had information about my husband that could have helped them get to know him quicker. I suddenly had spare hours so they could have encouraged me to stay and help - during mealtimes, for example. They could have even asked me to volunteer so I could really contribute to the care home community instead of making me feel as if I no longer had a role to play.” Zoe Harris, Relative

- How does your home work with relatives as partners in care?
- Be curious. Ask “What matters to you? How can we work together? How would you like to be involved and how would you like us to be involved?”
- When you work with relatives how do you celebrate success? What helps the good things happen?



HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

Relatives, staff and managers have shared with us how they try to keep communication open and honest, be available and share news to promote good relationships.

Training for families

One home told us that have introduced an induction day for relatives and also a training course for relatives to help them better understand dementia. This has helped relatives and staff to work together drawing on life history work, introducing doll therapy and acknowledging living with loss.

Sharing news and providing opportunities for engagement:

“We make sure we have email address for our relatives so we can email photos frequently. It’s a great way of keeping in touch and offering connection and reassurance.” **Care home manager**

Small acts of kindness:

“There were phone calls on days when Mum was having a really good day, very bright and alert and staff wanted me to know so that I could visit her and enjoy this.” **Marianne Manser, Relative**

“I was always contacted in a timely manner when there were any concerns and whenever I visited I was given her paperwork to read through and discuss.” **Mary Hardcastle, Relative**

Pets:

“Mum and I were not getting on well one day and so staff unhesitatingly agreed that I could leave the family dog with Mum for a few of hours. They knew that the dog would give her great comfort” **Julia Jones, Relative**

My Family Sunday:

“We offer ‘My Family Sunday’. Every Sunday families are invited to join the residents and staff for Sunday dinner. There is no cost for relatives - you wouldn’t pay for Sunday lunch at your Mum’s home so relatives don’t pay here! Good conversation flows with good food.” **Jenny, Activity Coordinator**

Special occasions:

“We were able to offer a relative a room on Christmas Eve. The husband could not bear to think about being without his wife on Christmas morning, (her first year in the care home) so he stayed in a spare room. He was there when she opened her eyes on Christmas morning.” **Care home manager**

Funerals and Memorial services:

“We invite relatives to hold the wake of their loved ones at the home. We offer a function room and buffet for free. This gives us all the chance to say goodbye together as one family.” **Nicola Williams, Care home manager**

One care home manager told us: “In the 4 years I have been a manager here, I have lost 51 residents – that is 51 families that we miss. I have written to these families inviting them to a memorial day at the home.”

Llys Gwyn
Residential Care Home for the Elderly

Dear Family Member,
We would like to invite you to our Special Day of Remembrance called ‘Forget Me Not’, a day of remembering your loved one and the cherished time they spend with us at home here at Llys Gwyn.

We will be holding a Service of Remembrance and a Celebration of Life to include refreshments and entertainment.

I and my staff team would love to see you again.

We not only miss your family member but we also miss seeing you!!!!

A time to catch up.

Hope to see you soon,

Marcella and all the staff
at Llys Gwyn

RELATIVES' MEETINGS – HOW DO YOU DO YOURS?

Many care homes tell us that they struggle to get families to come to relatives' meetings. Finding a time that works well for everyone is a real challenge, especially when many families live at a distance from the home.

It can require a lot of courage for relatives and staff to share their feelings with each other. Some staff tell us that they feel nervous working with relatives and sometimes take personally what relatives say to them. They often worry that they would not know the answers to the relative's questions and anxious they might say something wrong. Relatives might also worry about making complaints for fear that it might impact negatively on their loved one's care.

Supporting an open dialogue between relatives, relatives and staff requires time and skill. Getting the dialogue right in relatives meetings can be a great starting point.



Sharing what works

We asked Wendy McGowan, a care home manager from Seaview Care Home in Scotland what made a difference to the relatives' meetings at her home when she decided to make a few changes.

1. How did you encourage relatives to come to a meeting?

"I invited relatives to the meeting via a letter and through posters in the home. In the invite I said that the meeting would be 'something different' and that I would be asking what we did well and what we could do more of. I deliberately kept it mysterious!"

2. What made the biggest difference during the meeting?

"The biggest difference was my input. I usually spend most of the meeting talking: in this meeting there was active engagement and conversation between people attending the meeting. I used some of the My Home Life tools to help people share their individual experiences and feelings. I spoke very little once the ball was rolling."

3. What was the ongoing impact of this engagement?

"Relatives are more sociable with each other and my relationship has changed (positively) with a few family members as a result of this meeting. There has been more engagement in family members volunteering to help with special projects i.e. knitting twiddlemuffs [pictured] and two have volunteered to help form a focus group around the subject of meaningful activity provision in the home."



If you decide to hold a relatives' meeting, be creative in how you plan, advertise and run it. Have you used the My Home Life tool kit resources? They are free to download here: <http://myhomelife.org.uk/news-and-media/resources/>



TOP TIPS

for Care Home Practitioners

1. **Establishing a good relationship:** Relatives may need your reassurance particularly when they first engage with the home. Investing time at the beginning of the relationship with relatives can have benefits in the long term in terms of the trust and support that you can offer one another.
2. **Understanding them:** Be curious about relatives' experience of caring for their loved one – how might they want to be involved in the care going forward? What matters to them?
3. **Understanding you:** Relatives may value some sort of introduction to the home to gain an understanding of the people you support, the complexity of the work of care homes and what they can expect.
4. **Relatives as a resource to the home:** Relatives have huge potential in helping you build a picture of their loved one's needs, preferences, and the simple things that make a big difference.
5. **Privacy:** Offer spaces and opportunities for families to be close to their loved one so that they can talk properly or be intimate if they want to.
6. **Keeping relatives informed:** Contacting families regularly to share some positive news, however small, about their loved one can offer great reassurance and can help counterbalance those times when your news might not be so positive.
7. **Events for families:** Consider putting on special family meals or other events - or simply have snacks, treats and drinks available for when they visit. For residents who do not have close family, consider how to build similar links with their community and the friends who play a part in their lives.
8. **Relatives' meetings:** Think creatively about how you can make the most of your relatives' meetings; see families as your resource for feedback. What might they contribute individually or as a group?
9. **Keeping resilient:** It can sometimes feel challenging to be on the receiving end of complaints or negativity from relatives but finding out what matters to people can improve relationships and experiences.
10. **Keeping the connection going:** Consider how you might remain in touch with relatives whose loved one has died. They might really appreciate it and sometimes can continue to visit and support the community of the home.