



## No Visitors: A Guide for Care Partners During COVID-19

Evan Plys, PhD

### Part II: Tips for Staying Connected in Long-Term Care Communities

Care partners all over the world are having to adapt to a new way of interacting with loved ones, particularly those in residential long-term care communities. For now, routines are disrupted. Phone or video calls have replaced in-person visits. Relationships with staff and other residents are paused. There is very little in our internal or external world that we can control during the novel coronavirus outbreak, but we can still make adjustments to minimize the negative impact of this disruption to our everyday life as a care partner. This guide provides practical tips for care partners who experience disruptions to communication and routines.

#### Adapt Your Care Network and Care Roles

Care networks, that is all the individuals involved in supporting someone, are constantly adapting to changes. For example, think of the roles and dynamics of your care network before and after your loved one moved to a long-term care community. It takes time for the care network to adapt to such a major change. While your care network has already experienced change, the novel coronavirus outbreak is another major event that will require adaptations to the roles and dynamics of each individual in your network. To quickly adapt, care networks may want to explicitly discuss how they will manage these changes. Here are some tips to expedite the process.

- List *all* the members of the care network. This may include family, neighbors, and friends.
- List *all* the care needs at this time, including social and emotional support, communication, and sharing relevant personal and public health information.
- Define *your* own roles as a care partner during physical distancing by asking, “what is it that I am responsible for and able to do at this time?”
- Meet with other members of the care network and work together to assign care tasks to members of the care network. For example, your father’s neighbor who visited him in his assisted living may now write weekly emails. It is important to be realistic and collaborative in defining roles! Overall, this process will help to ensure that care needs are not going unmet and that you are utilizing the full care network.
- Set up a communication plan with your loved one *and* among the care network. For example, you may choose to send weekly emails among the care network to express gratitude and share relevant information.

Having clear expectations and roles among all members of the care network can reduce stress, conflict, and negative emotions. For detailed information on managing caregiving roles and stress, see <https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/4317295>

#### Staying Informed

Many care communities are sending email updates to families or devoting space in weekly newsletters about their response to the coronavirus outbreak. This information typically relates to new policies or activities the community is doing to keep your loved one safe and stimulated. It





is important to check that your contact information is current to ensure you receive these updates. It is also reasonable to ask the community their policy on individual updates. For example, staff may have the capacity to yield a daily or twice weekly phone call updating you on your loved one. Make sure you have a clear idea of the community's capacity to deliver personalized information. Additional information about standards of care and current regulations are often available on the community or operator websites, as well as state senior living or healthcare association websites. Connecting with other families and professionals through organizations like AARP (<https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/basics/info-2018/support-line.html?intcmp=AE-CAR-BB-LL2>) or Family Caregiver Alliance (<https://www.caregiver.org/caregiver-connect>) can also help with the exchange of information and even provide an outlet to vent about the challenges of being a care partner during the current coronavirus outbreak.

### Planning Virtual Visits

Care partners are shifting from in-person to virtual visits. Even though everyone is familiar with a phone call, it is still a different experience than an in-person visit. It is sometimes more challenging to plan a virtual visit. Particularly when visiting a loved one with cognitive limitations. This is because care partners often use the environment to stimulate activities or conversation. For example, during visits, care partners might engage in activities like cleaning, playing games, or looking at newspapers together, or starting conversations by saying, "I noticed there was a new painting in the hall..." or "I saw your nurse and they said..." Losing these environmental cues requires the care partner to be a little more proactive during virtual visits. Consider these tips for planning your virtual visit:

- Write out conversation topics for your calls, such as family news, current events (if this is a 'safe' topic within your relationship), or other shared interests like sports, fashion, celebrity gossip, etc. Conversations now may also be a nice opportunity to tap into the wisdom of aging and ask your loved one how this experience has changed or confirmed their views on themselves, life, relationships, or the world.
- Reminiscence is also a great way to maintain supportive communication and also has mental health benefits for older adults. Prompts may include: *Tell me about a time when it felt like everyday life drastically changed as a result of what was going on in the world. Tell me about all the different ways you've stayed informed of the news throughout your life. How did you entertain yourself when you were bored as a child, teenager, adult, etc.?* It can be enjoyable and informative to listen to responses to these types of prompts that target topics relevant to our current situation. Reminiscence also has the added bonus of helping you and your loved one find strengths that previously helped through other life challenges.
- Remote visits may be an opportunity to engage in activities like creating a family tree, photo album, or legacy video. Other tips for virtual visit activities include:
  - Tour a museum (<https://www.businesstraveller.com/business-travel/2020/04/02/these-museums-are-offering-free-virtual-tours/>) or zoo together (<https://people.com/travel/stuck-at-home-you-can-visit-these-world-famous-sites-from-your-couch-for-free/>)
  - Take a course or learn a skill together (<https://www.coursera.org/>)





- Engage in an activity together through Mather  
<https://www.mather.com/neighborhood-programs/telephone-topics>

### **Don't Forget the Emotional Parts of Your Visits**

Many care partners find that traveling to or from a visit is one of the few opportunities in their week to reflect on the relationship or situation with their loved one... or just cry in solitude. This time can be quite therapeutic. Consider blocking off 15 minutes before and after your call to reflect on your relationship and the time you spend with your loved one, as well as to allow yourself to express your emotions.

### **Stay Connected to the Community**

Many care partners are valued members of the residential care “family”. Physical distancing can make it challenging to feel as though you remain connected with the care community as a whole. Family councils may be a great opportunity to stay connected to the community, as well as share information and support one another. During the novel coronavirus outbreak, family councils may choose to meet more frequently or set up informal ways of connecting, like an email chain. Family councils may also be a forum to help out the community by ordering food delivery for staff, writing cards, or even making supplies, if needed. Care communities must designate a staff liaison to family councils, so this person can inform the group about needs and policies. Helping staff, other care partners, and the community can keep you connected and part of the family, as well as offer the benefits of engaging in kind acts, which improves stress and mood.

Negative life events typically affect people through two processes: emotions and disruptions to routines. During the novel coronavirus outbreak, care partners must manage difficult emotional reactions as well as disruptions to routines, roles, and relationships. It is important for care partners to recognize both of these processes to cope and adapt in a healthy manner.

For additional resources, check out the following:

- FACE COVID for psychological well-being by Russ Harris  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmvNCdpHUYM>
- Tips of caregivers of persons with dementia from the Alzheimer’s Association  
<https://www.alz.org/media/Documents/alzheimers-coronavirus-covid19-tips-for-dementia-caregivers-ts.pdf>
- COVID-19 resources from the Family Caregiver Alliance  
(<https://www.caregiver.org/coronavirus-covid-19-resources-and-articles-family-caregivers>)
- CDC Information for care facilities <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/long-term-care.html>

