

## Loneliness

Loneliness is like living in a glass bubble. Although you can see and be seen, the outside world looks painfully unfamiliar and voices sound far away.

Many of us pass through a glass bubble from time to time. When we're young and healthy, we reach out, to family, friends, work or hobbies for help in stepping out into the world again. But as we age and poor health requires us to seek care in a nursing home, stepping out is something many residents lose the will, the desire or the ability to achieve.

Here's what families can do to help lonely residents take that step while avoiding certain pitfalls that can make loneliness worse. But first, what's behind this painful state of mind?

Moving to a nursing home usually happens at a time when an elderly person has been through a number of losses; for example, loss of a loved one, or loss of health, independence, possessions, occupation or self-esteem. In turn, loss leads to grief, to depression, to social isolation and to loneliness -- which points to the first thing we should understand: loneliness rarely exists on its own. More often it is one of several emotions that burden the resident, and that may explain why loneliness looks like aggression in one person, confusion in another, or apathy in someone else.

Something else about loneliness: it locks horns with a basic human need for belonging and companionship. That means most lonely people unless perhaps depression has them in its grip will eventually respond to warm, sensitive, respectful attempts to help them step out of the glass bubble. They instinctively don't want to be in there.

But here lies a pitfall -- one that entraps families who are in the grip of emotions of their own, such as grief, guilt and denial. These are families who hurt so badly when they see the changes in their loved ones' health and lifestyle that they long for residents to participate enthusiastically in group activities and programs

... for in activity, surely, can we not be reassured that we made the right decision, that all is forgiven, that there is peace and acceptance?

Regretfully, no. In fact, activity for the wrong person at the wrong time has the power to make loneliness much worse.

Here are some tips to guide families in their efforts to help residents:

q Some lonely people respond to one-on-one situations, others to group activities. Look to the past for clues: was the person a loner or a socializer?

q Forcing a resident to participate in activities violates that person's right to make decisions -- which contributes to the helplessness that causes loneliness. Instead, invite the resident often to join you on the sidelines just to watch.

q Question that burning desire to see your family member active and involved. Who is the one truly in need in this situation?

q Be an empathetic listener; it's the one thing that truly works. Also, revisit positive memories together.

q Old friends alleviate loneliness better than new friends.

q Unsure how to help? Ask. "You seem down today, Mom -- is it because you haven't been spending time doing things that interest you?"

q Avoid telling someone to stop feeling lonely, or to just think positive and get out there and meet people.

Loneliness is an anguish we don't know the depths of until we've been there. If someone you care for is in a glass bubble, chip away at it with some solid listening, patience and love.