

Privacy

Each time we close the bedroom or bathroom door behind us...each time we sit in solitude at the kitchen table to balance our chequebooks...each time we book an appointment with our doctor to talk in confidence about a medical problem...we claim something that is basic to adulthood and independence: our right to privacy.

What happens when illness, frailty, dementia (e.g. Alzheimer's disease) or lifestyle prevent us from staking our claim to privacy? Does that mean we must resign ourselves to giving up this fundamental right?

Absolutely not. The point where an individual can no longer claim his or her right to privacy is the point where others — whether moved by duty, honour or compassion — must step in on the individual's behalf.

At Extendicare, we do our best to respect and safeguard residents' privacy and we state our beliefs on this subject openly and clearly in our *Commitment to Residents*.

Families can also play an important role in helping residents preserve their privacy. Here's how.

Go behind. Look behind certain behaviours for the reason they occur. Residents with Alzheimer's disease, for example, may not remember where their rooms are. They may open doors without knocking, wander into other people's rooms and rummage in their belongings. While these are expected behaviours for an individual with dementia, they are nonetheless distressing for other residents, their families and staff. You can help when you:

- Remember that the "trespass" is not personally meant; rather, it's the dementia at work. If those afflicted could be restored to their full functioning selves, they would not dream of upsetting you in this way.
- Gently lead "trespassers" out of the room by piquing their interest in something else.
- Avoid leaving valuables in your family member's room.

Exercise simple courtesies. Resist taking shortcuts, even when you think you know the answer:

- Knock before entering the resident's room, or ask before walking behind a privacy curtain.
- Ask before opening a resident's drawer or closet.
- Always close the privacy curtain and bathroom door when appropriate.
- Greet the resident's roommate with a warm hello and do your best not to "dominate" the room. Enter the roommate's private space only when invited.
- On the same note, you may choose to visit in one of the lounges or another quiet area. Or, if you know you will be discussing personal matters, ask staff if another private space may be available to you.
- Recognize that residents, like anyone else, may not always feel like talking or participating. Give the gift of privacy by gracefully accepting their desire to be alone. (However, if a resident's behaviour is unusual and you are concerned, talk to the nursing staff immediately.)

Walk in the resident's shoes. Giving people their privacy means using your imagination to step into another's point of view:

- If two or more family members are visiting at the same time, allow each visitor a few minutes alone with the resident so there's an opportunity to discuss subjects that may be personal or private.
- Look for opportunities to encourage residents to make decisions about their personal space in the home.

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Achieving privacy for long-term care home residents sometimes feels like two steps forward, one step back. Staff in particular feel the pressure of trying to balance the rights of many individuals living under one roof — most of whom are ill, frail or cognitively impaired, and each of whom has unique wants and needs. This, however, we know: with everyone pulling together, it *can* be done...and done well.