

Tips for Volunteering with the Elderly

A Handout for Volunteers

Thank you for volunteering with older adults! As specialists in senior care, we know your time and attention are incredibly meaningful to them. Even the simplest outreach can brighten their day and help them feel connected, engaged and cared for.

You also play a vital role as a link between these older adults and your faith community. Sometimes as people age, they don't have the same mobility. Difficulties driving, physically maneuvering, or even hearing might cause them to stop attending services. But matters of faith are still extremely important. The time you spend with them will help them stay connected to their faith.

We think you'll find volunteering with older adults to be incredibly rewarding and hope the following tips will help you make the most of your experience ministering to them.

Set the Scene

When you do a home visit, you might find the environment can make it hard to connect. The TV might be turned up or the room might be dark, which can interfere with your ability to communicate easily with one another. Ask if it's OK for you to adjust some settings so you can hear and see each other better during your visit. Don't just make changes. Check in first, so the person you're visiting has a sense of control. If you notice someone isn't wearing their hearing aids or glasses like they normally do, offer to help find them so you can communicate better.

Talk and Listen Appropriately

Many older adults experience hearing loss, especially for tones in higher registers. Try to speak more loudly than you usually would and in a lower tone to make sure you can be heard. Also try to speak more slowly and articulate your words to help them understand you better.

"Sometimes older people feel like they don't have a voice. Encourage them and give them permission to speak up for themselves."

Becky Fitzgerald, Development Director, Meadowlark Foundation

Similarly, make sure you are hearing and understanding correctly by practicing active listening. Repeat back what you heard and ask, "Is that right?" or follow up with short, simple questions to make sure you're understanding them correctly.

Continued

"Although people have a tendency to speak to older adults like they're children, they're still adults — just older with different needs. Meet them where they are by speaking more slowly or loudly and make sure they're understanding you."

Kathleen Spearman, Social Worker, Meadowlark



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“Be open to what you could learn from the person that you’re visiting with. I had a very deep conversation recently that challenged me to explore how I could grow, learn and empathize more with other people’s experiences. We all have lots to learn and that knowledge comes in various ways. It just might be an older person who inspires you.”

Becky Fitzgerald, Development Director, Meadowlark Foundation

Be Patient and Open

We all lead busy lives and often have calendars full of appointments, errands and chores. But your interaction might be the only connection an older adult has in a given day. Don’t rush it. Take your time.

Some adults may have heavy subjects like the loss of a spouse on their minds. If they want to talk about their feelings, try to stay open, even if it’s difficult for you. You might feel pressure to say or do the “right” thing without knowing what that is. Simple questions like “Would you like to pray together?” or “Is there anything you might find comforting at this time?” can allow them to direct the conversation and take the pressure off of you.

Chances are by being more present in these ways, you’ll find you get more out of the visit, too.

Be Aware of the Surroundings

Take a moment to take everything in. Open with an observation or question beyond “How are you?” to get the conversation going. “You sound really chipper today” or “What have you been doing to keep busy?” will open more doors than “yes” or “no” questions.

You can also take note of their surroundings:

- Are they eating properly?
- Is their home overly cluttered?
- Are they struggling with trip hazards?
- What support systems do they have in place?

As a regular visitor, you are also likely the eyes and ears of your church. Privacy is important and you don’t want to share personal information if it would violate their privacy. However, it’s important to make sure they are safe. If you notice changes or think someone could use additional support, you can point them to services that would improve their quality of life.

Direct to Further Resources

You do not need to solve every problem you see. But you can help educate people about available resources, including religious support from your faith leader.

Again, checking in can help them feel in control. For example:

- You seem upset about this topic. Would you like me to ask the chaplain to reach out to you?
- I noticed you haven’t been finishing your meals lately. Would you like me to help you find a meal delivery program to help get you some better tasting food?

Sudden changes can indicate they’re having trouble. You might be one of the first to spot any areas of concern and rally more support.

Lastly, approach everything with a bit of grace. You may not know the full story of what an older adult is dealing with. Be open and empathetic. Your connection will mean the world.

