

Promoting Dignity for People in Your Care

(2 credits)

After completing this section you should be able to:

1. Explain dignity and list reasons for treating people in your care with dignity
2. List ways to talk respectfully to people in your care
3. List ways to promote dignity when assisting with personal care
4. Describe ways to treat dying people and their families with dignity
5. Demonstrate ways to respond when residents or clients do not treat caregivers with dignity

1. Explain dignity and list reasons for treating people in your care with dignity

Everyone agrees that dignity is one of those qualities that is necessary for excellent care. However, dignity may mean different things to different people. What does “dignity” mean to you?

Some responses you may have thought of are honor, respect, status, prestige, trying to avoid embarrassing situations for the resident/client, helping to deflect attention away from someone when an embarrassing situation has occurred, and more.

One definition of **dignity** is that it is the quality or state of being worthy of respect, esteem, nobility, and honor.

There are many reasons people in your care should be treated with respect and dignity. Some of these reasons include:

- People feel better being treated that way.
- All humans deserve to be treated that way.
- The Residents’ Rights and Clients’ Rights laws require caregivers to do so.

Residents’ and Clients’ Rights are laws that state that people within your care

have the right to a dignified existence. This includes self determination, which means that these people make their own decisions as much as possible (Fig 2-1).

Residents and clients must also be allowed to communicate with people both inside and outside of their facility or home. They should also have access to services provided inside and outside of their facility or home.



Fig. 2-1. Your goal is to protect and promote the rights of each and every person in your care. It's also the law!

All people like to be treated with dignity. That includes people who are sick or disabled. Dignity and respect should be used

in all interactions with people in your care, with whatever type of care you are providing (cleaning rooms, cooking food, giving baths, offering assistance with toileting). Dignity touches all areas of care.

2. List ways to talk respectfully to people in your care

There are many ways to talk respectfully to the people for whom you care. Some of the ways are listed below:

1. Call people by the name they prefer.

Most people want to be recognized and called by the name they prefer (Fig. 2-2). Some people were named something that they no longer use. (Example: Her full name is “Mary Jean,” but she goes by “Jean.”) Other people have difficult-to-pronounce names.

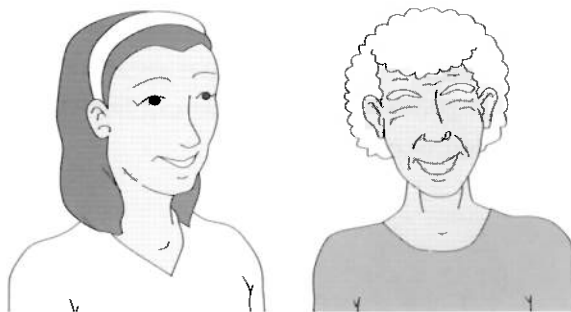


Fig. 2-2. Calling a person by the name she prefers is one way to promote dignity and respect.

The way to find out what people want to be called is to ask them. A good time to do this is when you are introducing yourself. (Example: My name is Mary Jean Smith. Please call me “Jean.” What would you like me to call you?)

Do not assume that their answer will be their first name or a variation of it. Many older people grew up in communities where younger people or people who did not know each other well always used “Mr.” or “Mrs.”

Do not use “pet names” or nicknames unless the person asks you to. Have you ever had a clerk call you “Honey” or “Sweetheart?” How did you feel? Many people really dislike being called names such as these by anyone other than family or close friends. Do not assume anything! It is always better to ask.

2. Always acknowledge a person.

One of the biggest slights people feel is when someone “didn’t even speak to me.”

In a nursing facility, it is also very important to be recognized and acknowledged; otherwise, people may feel unimportant.

How can you be sure to acknowledge your residents, even in the middle of a busy day? A smile, a nod, or a quick, “Hello,” even when passing quickly in the halls, goes a long way toward making a person feel important and cared about.

3. Your tone of voice is important!

The people for whom you care are adults. Use the same tone of voice with them as you use for other adults in everyday conversation.

Do not sound like you are talking to a child or sound rough or hurried.

People with dementia or those who have suffered a stroke may not be able to understand words, but they can feel or understand the emotion behind the words.

4. Choose your words carefully.

Cursing and swearing is, of course, never allowed. Scolding or belittling a person in your care is verbal abuse, and a violation of their rights.

People have different backgrounds and are comfortable with different types of

language. For example, some may have difficulty with the direct way body functions are talked about in a nursing facility or in home care. They may find it embarrassing to be asked about their bowel movements or voiding. Be sensitive to this.

If you care for people who speak a different language, they may really enjoy it if you learn a few words of their language. How nice to be told, "Good morning," or "Thank you" in the language they spoke as a child.

However, do not speak a different language in the presence of your residents/clients and their families unless they also speak that language. This is common courtesy.

3. List ways to promote dignity when assisting with personal care

Personal care is a very private experience. It may be embarrassing for the people in your care. You must be professional when assisting with these tasks. Before you begin any task, explain to the person exactly what you will be doing. Ask if he or she would like to use the bathroom or bedpan first. Provide the person with privacy. Let him or her make as many decisions as possible about when, where, and how a procedure is done. This promotes dignity and independence.

Here are some other ways to promote dignity while assisting with personal care:

- Assure physical privacy for all people, even those who do not seem to know the difference.
- Make sure each person is properly draped and pull privacy curtains and/or close doors to assure physical privacy during care.

- Knock on doors (even if they are open), announce yourself, and wait for a reply before entering.
- Respect private conversations and telephone calls. Leave the room when they receive or make personal phone calls.
- Do not talk "over" people, or ignore their presence.
- Do not interrupt people while they are in the bathroom.
- Respect private time and personal property.
- Do not interrupt them if they are dressing themselves.
- Be patient while residents and clients choose their clothing. Keep their bodies covered whenever possible when you assist with dressing.



Fig. 2-3. What seems to be happening in this picture that does not support treating a person with dignity? How could the situation be improved to better provide care with dignity?



Fig. 2-4. What seems to be happening in this picture that does not support treating a person with dignity? How could the situation be improved to better provide care with dignity?

- Encourage them to do things for themselves. Be patient while they do so.

Remember that Residents' and Clients' Rights include the right to privacy for medical treatment and personal care.

4. Describe ways to treat dying people and their families with dignity

Working in a nursing facility or in a person's home with older and ill individuals probably exposes you to death more often than other people. You can treat people with dignity when they are approaching death by respecting their rights and their individual preferences.

Some legal rights to remember when caring for the terminally ill include:

1. The right to refuse treatment.

Remember that whether you agree or disagree with a person's decisions, the choice is not yours. It belongs to the person involved.

Sometimes, when the person is not capable of making a decision, they have told their family how they wish things to be done. Be supportive of family members; do not judge them. They are most likely following the dying person's wishes.

2. The right to have visitors.

It may be inconvenient to have visitors coming and going at odd hours, but when death is close, it is an emotional time for all those involved. Saying goodbye can be a very important part of dealing with a loved one's death (Fig. 2-5).

It may also be very reassuring to the dying person to have someone in the room, even if they do not seem to be aware of their surroundings.



Fig. 2-5. The dying process often involves visits from family and friends. It is the dying person's right to have visitors.

3. The right to privacy.

Privacy is a basic right, but privacy for visiting or even when the person is alone, may be even more important now.

Ways to treat dying people and their families with dignity include the following:

- **Respect their wishes in all possible ways.** Communication between staff and care team members is extremely important at this time so that everyone understands what the individual's wishes are. Caregivers can listen carefully for ideas on how to provide simple gestures that may be special and appreciated. This could be something as simple as a milkshake.

Be careful not to make promises that cannot or should not be kept.

- **Listen if they want to talk.** Listening may be one of the most important things you can do for a person who is dying. He or she may also need the quiet, reassuring, and loving presence of another person.
- **Do not babble or be especially cheerful or sad.** Sometimes you may be nervous when you know that a person is dying. That nervousness may lead to giddiness and giggling or talking too much. Or, if you let your emotions get out of hand,

you may be so sad and upset that you cannot be any help to the person who needs you.

- **Keep them as comfortable as possible.** Try to keep the person pain-free. The nurse or your supervisor needs to know immediately if pain medication is requested. Keep the person clean and dry and the linens wrinkle-free.
- **Do not isolate or avoid them.**
- **Assure privacy when they want it.**
- **Respect the privacy of the family and other visitors.** They may be upset and not want to be bothered with others now. They may welcome a friendly smile, however, and should not be isolated, either.

5. Demonstrate ways to respond when residents or clients do not treat caregivers with dignity

Have you ever had a person in your care treat you disrespectfully? It happens. Some possible reasons for this type of behavior include the following:

1. **She is just that way.** That may be the case. However, if you get to know someone when they are old and sick, you really do not know what he or she was like in the past. Perhaps this person has always been difficult to get along with. Or maybe she is just unhappy because she is ill, or because she is unable to do the things she has always done, or because she is away from home (if in a facility).
2. **He is confused about who you are.** He may think you are someone who has hurt him in some way in the past. There may be something about you that reminds him of someone he had a problem with a long time ago. For example, perhaps your red

hair triggers a memory of a teacher who punished him unfairly in grade school. In his current confusion, he cannot tell that you are not her.

3. **She is afraid about what you are trying to do.** She may feel panic and fear when you approach her with treatment equipment. In her confusion, she may believe you are going to hurt her (Fig. 2-6).



Fig. 2-6. When a person is confused, she may be frightened by what you are trying to do. Remain calm. Do not argue with her. Gently explain what you are trying to do.

4. **He thought he heard you make a rude comment to him.** People who are hard of hearing may not only have a difficult time hearing the speaking voice, but many times may also hear the words jumbled up. Some letters are harder to hear than others, so some words may sound like totally different ones. Shouting will not help this form of hearing loss.

Physical damage to the brain can cause confusion or sudden changes in emotional states (Alzheimer's disease, strokes, etc.). Someone may seem "fine" one minute and confused or belligerent the next. They are not in control of these

changes, and they are not “faking it.” Their disease or brain damage can cause this strange behavior.

You do not know what is going on inside a person’s head. You do not know who they think you are, what they think you are going to do to them, etc.

People with Alzheimer’s disease will probably not recognize their own need for care and may not appreciate your best efforts to help them.

Dealing with people suffering from dementia, brain damage, or other similar problems can be very difficult. There are ways to respond kindly when residents or clients are rude to you. Some of these ways include:

- Do not try to argue with them. This probably will not help, and could make them more upset.
- Take a deep breath! Counting to ten before responding may help you avoid saying something you may regret later.
- Do not take it personally. Remember, they do not necessarily know who they are talking to or about. Besides, your job in this setting is to be a professional caregiver, not a friend. This means that you cannot expect that you will have a give-and-take relationship like you would with a friend. You are there to do a job for them.
- Stay calm.
- Maintain a sense of humor. Do not laugh at the person, but try to see the humor in the situation. After all, when before in your life have you been accused of being a spy?
- Try to rearrange the schedule if the person simply will not cooperate. Do not force a person who is calling you names

and thinks you are trying to kill her to go to the shower room with you. This does not allow dignity for either of you.

- Talk to your supervisor if you feel unable to deal with the person calmly, or if it appears this person is repeatedly picking on you (Fig. 2-7).

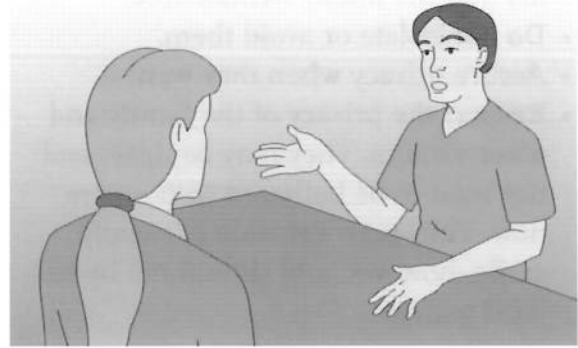


Fig. 2-7. Talk to your supervisor if you feel that you cannot deal calmly with a client or resident who is rude to you.