

Coronavirus: How to Stay in Touch When Visiting Is Not Possible



Overview:

The advent of the novel coronavirus has made the job of caring for a loved one with an illness or disability even more challenging than it usually is. If you are a long-distance caregiver, you may already have good tips and tricks for staying in touch with your loved one from afar. For those of us with loved ones living nearby in a nursing home or assisted living facility that has restricted visiting, we now face some of the same difficulties: how to stay connected with our loved ones, make sure our loved ones are okay, and ensure they are being well cared for in our absence.

This guide provides options and suggestions for communicating with your loved one and her local caregivers when you cannot be there in person.

Understand the guidelines for visiting nursing homes.

On March 13th, 2020, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) updated guidelines to nursing homes for screening employees and visitors (Guidance for Infection Control and Prevention of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Nursing Homes). Nursing homes have also been charged with identifying potential COVID-19 cases quickly and isolating them to prevent exposure to other nursing home residents.

The following instructions were provided for nursing homes to monitor and limit visitors, as

necessary. *“Facilities should restrict visitation of all visitors and non-essential health care personnel, except for certain compassionate care situations, such as an end-of-life situation.” See page 2 for the complete excerpt.*

Assisted living facilities do not fall under federal regulation. Their response to the coronavirus will likely reflect their state regulations and recommendations. If your loved one lives in an assisted living facility, check its website or call to understand the precautions being taken to prevent the spread of the virus and learn about any new measures regarding visitors.

Pull together while staying apart.

Social distancing (also known as physical distancing) is an important part of containing the spread of the coronavirus. Visiting your loved one may be ill advised, restricted, or prohibited if s/he lives in a facility. However, this is a time when people need to support each other more than ever.

Once you have assessed and addressed your loved one’s material needs (e.g., ensuring an ample supply of household items, food, medications, and other care supplies), it’s time to think about ways to stay in contact and help keep each other’s spirits up.



Social isolation can affect your loved one's health and sense of well-being; therefore, it's essential to maintain and even increase opportunities to be in contact (albeit remotely) as much as possible for both of you!

💡 Explore high-tech and low-tech options for staying in touch.

Take advantage of telephone and video chat applications, such as FaceTime or Skype, to stay in contact if you are unable to visit in person. Consider your loved one's technical abilities and a combination of communication methods that are appropriate – landline phones, cell phones, tablets, computers, etc.

Increase the number and variety of opportunities for staying in touch:

- **Set up a schedule of calls among several family members** to reach

out to your loved one regularly at different times. If your loved one lives in a facility and has a phone in his or her room, set up a schedule so s/he can plan to be at the phone to receive calls.

- **Involve the kids.** If older children and teenagers are interested, encourage them to call on their own to say hello, share school projects, or just hang out for a short time.
- **Explore video calling options,** such as FaceTime, Skype, or Zoom. Most of these have free options.

Full Excerpt from CMS Guidance for Infection Control and Prevention of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Nursing Homes

Facilities should restrict visitation of all visitors and non-essential health care personnel, except for certain compassionate care situations, such as an end-of-life situation.”

In those cases, visitors will be limited to a specific room only. Facilities are expected to notify potential visitors to defer visitation until further notice (through signage, calls, letters, etc.). Note: If a state implements actions that exceed CMS requirements, such as a ban on all visitation through a governor's executive order, a facility would not be out of compliance with CMS' requirements. In this case, surveyors would still enter the facility, but not cite for noncompliance with visitation requirements.

*For individuals that enter in compassionate situations (e.g., end-of-life care), facilities should require visitors to perform hand hygiene and use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), such as face masks. Decisions about visitation during an end of life situation should be made on a case by case basis, which should include careful screening of the visitor (including clergy, bereavement counselors, etc.) for fever or respiratory symptoms. Those with symptoms of a respiratory infection (fever, cough, shortness of breath, or sore throat) should not be permitted to enter the facility at any time (even in end-of-life situations). Those visitors that are permitted, must wear a face mask while in the building and restrict their visit to the resident's room or other location designated by the facility. They should also be reminded to frequently perform hand hygiene. **

*CMS Memorandum 3/4/2020: Guidance for Infection Control and Prevention of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in nursing homes Ref: QSO-20-14-NH, updated 3/13/2020 (<https://www.cms.gov/files/document/qso-20-14-nh-revised.pdf>)



COVID-19

! Quick Tips

Stay in touch with your loved one by phone, text, video calling apps, and other communication options.

Keep in regular contact with the facility if your loved one is in a nursing home or assisted living and visiting is restricted.

If there was ever a time for cat videos, it's now. Share some with your loved one — unless only dog videos will do!

- **Use your smartphone and/or other applications** for texting or sharing pictures, such as What'sApp, Instagram, and Facebook Messenger.
- **Consider purchasing a device designed for less “tech-savvy” individuals.** Perhaps a smart speaker, with Amazon's Alexa, Apple's Siri, or Google Assistant would be helpful, by allowing voice commands instead of requiring typing. Some companies, for example, Consumer Cellular, have phones and tablets with limited options (to be less confusing), large keyboards, and other design features to address hearing, vision, or cognitive challenges. Have any new device delivered first to you so that you can set it up for your loved one in advance.
- **Send a letter or postcard.** Cards and letters in the mail are still great to connect with someone you love. Including photos, kids' artwork, or other mementos can

provide comfort. Your loved one gets the opportunity to feel your presence and hear from you each time s/he re-reads your correspondence.

💡 **Communicate regularly with facilities and agencies that provide care.**

If your loved one lives in a facility, check its website or call to find out what measures and precautions staff are taking against the spread of the virus, especially with regard to visitors.

Many facilities are allowing only essential visitors to enter the building and creating other restrictions within the building to limit contact. If visiting is restricted or prohibited, ask the facility what steps it is taking to ensure that residents can communicate with family.

Some facilities are creating opportunities and times in the day to assist residents to make

phone calls or facilitate FaceTime or other video calls. If they are not already doing so, request that a daily update be posted on the residence's website or sent via email or text to let families know the status of the facility and any changes in plans or routines that families should be aware of.

If the facility has a resident family council, contact the council and find out how residents' families might help each other by staying in touch and reporting on what they know or learn.

If your loved one receives help from a home health aide, contact the agency to learn about its protocols and plans for preventing the spread of the virus. Ask what arrangements are being made for back-up care if your loved one's aide is unable to come and provide services.

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Ask your kids to write letters or cards to loved ones you cannot visit. Add a drawing, other artwork, or the last report they got back from school to share with grandma or grandpa. Scan and email the letters and other documents to a designated email address at the facility, if they are not accepting other mail.



If you have hired a private home health aide, discuss the precautions and practices that you expect to be observed in your loved one's home, such as handwashing, disinfecting surfaces, etc. Create a mutually agreed upon plan if either the aide or your loved one becomes ill from COVID-19 or comes into contact with someone who has developed symptoms of COVID-19 or has come into contact with someone exposed or otherwise at risk.

💡 **Manage your anxiety.**

Take care of yourself. The current public health emergency is

increasing anxiety and worry for just about everyone. You may find yourself running on empty sooner than usual with the added stress this pandemic has created.

These are not typical times. We can't necessarily hang on to our usual expectations without causing ourselves and our families undue stress. Now is not the time to expect perfection in all areas of life.

Your child might use more screen time than you'd normally allow. You might struggle to balance parenting and caring for your loved one, with your work; some days

you'll feel more competent in one of these areas than you will in the other. And the next day, the balance may skew in the opposite direction. That's okay.

Like everyone else right now, you're doing the best that you can. And the best that you can is good enough.

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