

Gentle Advocacy is Relationship Based and Solution Oriented in Long Term Care

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The relational aspect of advocacy cannot be underestimated. It is especially important when giving a resident support to have their voice heard. It is a key indicator of satisfaction and successful outcome. Understandably, advocating is more often elevating the voice because of something which is not pleasing or even upsetting.

As family members, you may become emotionally distressed when you find out your loved one isn't receiving regular toileting, clothes are in tatters from the laundry, and dentures disappear from the dinner tray. Or, a temp or new hire is not following ADLs, or there are food service issues when the menu is not in line with dietary needs, or food is served too cold to eat or not cut up enough.

Elevating your voice is necessary, but how you effectively get to that point can be hard work. In addition, you may need to know the required tools to help use your voice for your loved one.

This is an excellent time to remember and review your Family Council Code of Conduct. Show respect, sensitivity and consideration for all people working and living at your long-term care home. They work hard, and they may be understaffed. It takes a special kind of person to support vulnerable adults in daily life and work within protocols and guidelines.

Taking a Gentle approach helps you to navigate problem-solving. Here are a few suggestions to help when you need to win the support of the care home to give a loved one a better daily living experience in long-term care.

Gentle Advocacy – solution-based relationships

1. Get **to know your loved one's care team**; the care aides, nursing staff, building maintenance people, director of care, dietician, recreation manager, social worker, occupational therapists, and physiotherapists. Recognize that everyone works shifts, and this can add to your frustration. Make this a relationship opportunity to help deepen your understanding of how the team works and allow them to understand what's important for you and your loved one. Find a team member you feel comfortable speaking with. Note who your loved one responds to best.
2. If you are confronted with a problem, whatever the issue, you can **PAUSE and take a moment to consider who is the best person to talk to about this**. Sometimes a caregiver can give you the first bit of insight you need. However, they may also speak to others, so your discretion may be necessary. If you need help speak to the nursing staff, they may direct you to a lead nurse. Before you decide who to go to, think about what the root of the problem could be. Could this be an underlying problem of the care home? Is it due to communication between the resident and caregiver/s? Are there triggers affecting the staff or your loved one? You won't know unless you ask what others see or experience. How can you help make it better? Consider your options and what you are feeling. Do you know what your options are? Do you know the care homes' complaint policy? Know who can help to change the situation. Follow the protocol. Be curious and ask simple questions.

3. Your next step should include **noting the problem** and **keeping the facts in chronological order with the date and times mentioned**. Whether speaking or preparing a note or letter, keep it free from emotion, or blame, yet use direct conversation. Put your requests in a note form to the nursing station. Keep copies of your communications. If the nursing station is unable to satisfy your request, be curious and ask why. What is the barrier. Is there another way? Can you think of some simple solutions, that you might present to them later when they have time?
4. **Timing is important**. Address your concern early before it escalates. Think of the person you are speaking to. Is this person available to hear your concern? Do they have time now to listen? Are they already aware of the problem? Do they need time to absorb this to follow through? It is better when it is in writing and have the time to think it through?
5. **Nursing and request a time to meet** - Communicating with nursing staff will often be on the run or while at the nursing station. They are busy and usually cannot give you meeting time. Have a brief discussion about your concern and leave them a note to follow up with. If you are not getting results, ask why, be curious. Ask if you can offer some solutions. Give them time to affect the change. Although they can solve a lot of problems, they may not be the ones to problem solve some situations. You may have to make a call or send an email to set up a time to speak with another department such as maintenance, or the dietician.
6. **Director of Care** - If you have a concern about a staff member and the nursing staff have not been able to help you, you can contact the Director of Care in most care homes. Let them briefly know your concern. When sending your concern in writing make it clear, concise, and chronological if necessary. Be sure your information is factual without judgement or beliefs. This complaint needs to be evidence based. If it has left your loved one mentally or emotionally distressed, please clarify in simple terms. Or physically injured, this needs to be addressed. They may want to meet with you first or they may ask you to send your complaint in writing. They take this level of complaint very seriously and will need to address it with the staff member. Do you have proof? You have a right to be heard by the DOC or equivalent regarding your concerns. If they don't have a solution, let them know you want to understand the barriers to help problem solve. Let them know you've given it thought and may have some simple solutions to benefit the residents and the staff. With compromise solutions can be found.
7. **Remove your emotions, be calm and reasonable** when discussing your problem with the other person, **stay focused on what you are saying** about your concerns. We can go from 0 to 100 emotionally when we see injustices related to vulnerable adults, especially our own. We are also communicating with people steeped in rules and regulations that they need to follow. We do not want to be labelled as demanding or aggressive when they may feel blamed or attacked.
8. If you need help determining whom to speak with, **check with the Family Council; they can help direct you**. You are not alone. Others likely have had similar problems.
9. **Breathe deep and stay rooted in knowing there are solutions** if we communicate clearly and respectfully. Some resolutions may be more radical, but the practice of Gentle Advocacy is to solve problems before they escalate into big problems. Offer solutions that might work. Be prepared to

compromise on both sides. There should be no blame, no them and us. The end goal is that your person is recognized and has a quality of life that allows them to feel valued and respected and to live

their final years in peace. Also, the care home prefers to know this resident is happy with underlying problems resolved. They want to do a good job and it's usually under adverse and stressful conditions at the best of times for them.

Barb Kirby has been a private seniors advocate for 14 years and, before that, had 15 years of lived experience caring for both parents living in Long Term Care Homes. In addition, she co-chaired her father's family council for ten years. She built her business focusing on societal issues rather than systemic issues. Now as a member of the VCAFC, she is happy to marry her years of experience with a lens to focus on how she can support both societal and systemic change.

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