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Why (and How) to Personalize a Nursing Home Room

Sep 17th, 2013 – by Eleanor Feldman Barbera



As a psychologist in long-term care, I've walked into thousands of rooms over the years. Among many mostly bare quarters, a few stood out for their warmth and their ability to convey the life of the person living there.

Why is it so important to decorate the room of your loved one when they aren't able to do it themselves?

For the Resident

Even if their stay is expected to be a brief one, it's important for their room to have a personal touch. Moving from home to hospital to rehab can be disconcerting for most people and disorienting for many, especially those with dementia.

Having a personal item or two can be reassuring and can act as what mental health professionals call a "transitional object." A transitional object for a young child might be a teddy bear that accompanies them to a sleepover; a transitional object for an adult could be a treasured photo of their parents or their wedding day.

Aside from providing a touchstone during a difficult time, room decor can be a powerful reminder of who your loved one has been in their life before they became "a patient." Staff may refer to Mrs. Rivera as "the lady in 214," but when she enters a Room 214 filled with reminders of her life and accomplishments she can feel comfortable and proud.

A resident with a few photos on the side table has constant reminders that there are people who care how they're doing—their personal cheerleading squad.

For residents with dementia, it's helpful to write the names of the family members and their connection. Mrs. Cook, for instance, can look at the photo and be reminded that she's seeing her youngest son, Tom, and not a familiar face she realizes she should know but doesn't.

For the Staff

A personalized room reminds staff that someone outside the facility is checking on Mrs. Cook. It also

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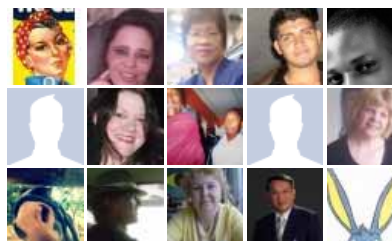
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helps them give Mrs. Cook the care she needs.

For example, if staff members see a photo of her in her flower garden, they'll be able to make a personal connection, perhaps sharing a discussion of gardening while engaging in previously challenging personal care. If they know Mr. Smith used to work nights, they'll be more able to understand and perhaps accommodate his unusual schedule.

How to Decorate

There are many ways you can personalize a room, but if you can do only one thing, bring or mail in labeled photos of the family. Use copies, not originals.

Other important items include a picture of the resident as a young person, photos of them engaging in valued activities (such as heading to work, traveling on a special trip or spending time with grandchildren), and copies of awards or diplomas reflecting their contribution to the world.

Asking your loved one if there's something they'd like from home can identify what's most important to them and increase their sense of control.

As wonderful as fresh flowers are, if you're not there in three days to remove them or to regularly water a plant, consider long-lasting artificial flowers to cheer a windowsill.

A quilt (labeled with the resident's name) not only transforms the look of a room from institutional to homey, but allows your loved one to feel literally covered with affection.

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Eleanor Feldman Barbera, PhD, the author of The Sawy Resident's Guide, is an accomplished speaker and eldercare coach with over 16 years of experience as a psychologist in long-term care. She runs the award-winning website MyBetterNursingHome.com, which focuses on how to create long-term care where everybody thrives.

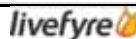
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