

# The Friendly Visit

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The length of Volunteer Hospice assignments can range from “zero” days to several months. Once in a while You will agree to take on a new assignment and later be informed by your Agency that the Patient has already passed away, before your initial visit. You see them zero times. Most assignments will last several weeks or even over several months. You need to understand and be willing at the outset to take on such a commitment. When going into a private “home setting”, You will generally be visiting at a regularly scheduled time and day, at least once a week. Visits can run from around ½ hour to perhaps two hours, depending on the condition and energy of the Patient. As a Volunteer it is important for You to understand how profound and important these assignments are to the Patient and Family. You are becoming an integral part of their life stories during a tumultuous and often desperate time.

It will be helpful for You, the Friendly Visitor, to keep in mind that every Patient You see and every visit You go on is unique. You will never know exactly quite what You might encounter with each new visit. Your experience during your next meeting may be very similar to your last visit, or it may be fundamentally different. Although there is a “social element” to your

visits, a Hospice friendly visit is really not merely a “social engagement”. There are several critical factors that are very different from a casual, friendly meeting with acquaintances. Again, in Hospice Care, the Patient and surrounding Loved Ones are caught up in the overwhelming and confusing and depressing confrontation with a life-shortening disease. Their most basic priorities and time-line horizons about their lives have shifted dramatically. They are often being driven on an intense roller coaster of emotional ups and downs that can change in an instant. The anticipated course for the Patient is one of inevitable decline, incapacity and death. This is the profound and desperate underlying Human situation that You as a Friendly Visitor are “wading” into. Again, this is hardly a normal social outing.

And yet, paradoxically as a Hospice representative, You are there precisely to attempt to bring the positive emotional Human benefit of a friendly social interaction. Ideally, this can have a powerful therapeutic effect on the Patient’s current well-being. The more assignments and experience You, as a Hospice Volunteer go through, the more confident You will become about each visitation.

After compiling all the relevant information from your Agency about the Patient’s conditions,

including the close Family Caregivers, and the situations You will be encountering, You will then contact the Family directly by phone. During this initial conversation, You should review briefly the key medical information You have received from the Agency. You will also ask about the best day of the week and time of the day to visit. Confirm exactly who will be there and who will remain there during the visit. Ask about what kinds of activities, if any the Patient might be interested in doing during the visit. Also, it is generally a good idea to tell the Family that You will call an hour or two before the actual visit to remind them that You will be there. Going forward, some Families will ask You to place such a call before every visit. Other Families will tell You that they will expect You at your scheduled time and that You do not need to call before each visit. Just do exactly as they request.

It is extremely important for You to be reliable in terms of the Patient's and Family's expectations of your visits. Again, keep in mind that they are under intense emotional pressure and stress because of the situation they are enduring. It is a relatively minor issue, but it is helpful if they can depend on your promises and efforts from one week to the next. If for any reason You will be substantially late or unable to

make an expected visit, You need to always call them ahead of time. During this conversation You should confirm your later expected time of arrival if running late, or the time and day of your next scheduled visit. Also, for a variety of reasons, there may be cases where the Family may cancel a visit through the Agency and this information will be relayed to You. Likewise, the Family may cancel a visit for various reasons during your confirmation call before stopping by. You truly need to make it a "habit" of being regarded as highly dependable by the Patient and Family Members.

**As a friendly visiting Hospice Volunteer, You should quickly develop a critical social "skill or ability" to utilize whenever You encounter a Patient and surrounding Loved Ones. You will learn to automatically "assume a neutral emotional and energetic attitude" towards the Patient, towards individual Loved Ones and to the overall situation You are encountering. This means that You will go into each new or next assignment without any planned emotional agenda or expectations of what will occur during the visitation. You need to be aware of and "match" the emotional and energetic environment**

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**You find yourself within. (Note-this is fundamentally different from tentatively planning various “activities” during an upcoming visit.)**

So, for example, You will sometimes walk into a situation where there is funny, friendly laughter and storytelling going on. In this case, You discover that both Patient and Family Members are in an active and positive mood. It is important for You to “assume” a similar attitude and behavior. If You walk in with a sullen, sorrowful or depressed frame of mind, it will contradict the emotional energy in the room. Similarly, if You go in to visit a Patient and You deliberately try to take on a light-hearted and humorous mind-set, and the Patient and Loved Ones are feeling overwhelmed and angry and confused, You may well come across as insensitive or dismissive of their circumstances.

Again, You should approach each new and next visitation with a conscious “neutral emotional and energetic attitude” and then adjust your personal perspectives and behavior to reflect the circumstances You encounter. This is an innate Human empathic ability You will develop and perfect with each new assignment.

You should endeavor to be as prepared as is possible for each new or next visit. Always try to have in mind what you “might” engage in before

each visitation. (Again, this is different from the planned “neutral emotional engagement” talked about above.) Using the general information from your Agency and in speaking with Family Members, during your first visit, You will probably simply plan on friendly introductions and getting to know each other. This obviously assumes that the Patient is still capable of coherent conversation and social interactions. During subsequent visits, You might dig deeper into biographical questions and reminiscing about the Patient’s life, relationships and interests. Depending on the Patient’s present mood and energy, You might pick from the “Activities Sheet” and be prepared to engage in something that might be of interest. Approaching and even during a Hospice visit, You will always need to be highly flexible and ready and willing to change plans and Activities based upon the Patient’s conditions. You might go in planning to engage in a specific activity, but upon arrival realize that the Patient does not have the energy nor inclination to do so. You will simply adjust your efforts accordingly. Also, it is often the case that the most meaningful role You can play is to be a quiet compassionate presence with little or no verbal communication.

As mentioned, the actual course and duration of each friendly visit will depend primarily upon

the Patient's current physical and mental conditions. During one week's encounter, the Patient may be energetic, active and in a good mood. The following week, You may find the Patient tired, distracted, sleepy and depressed. Again, You will learn to quickly adjust to whatever You run into. The more times You visit the Patient and Family, the better will be your understanding and insights about the overall situation.

As a Hospice Volunteer, it will be helpful for You to be mindful of the Human realities You are dealing with. You are involved with a Patient who is on an inexorable dying trajectory. Whether You spend several weeks or several months visiting that Individual, during that time-frame, You will remain generally stable and healthy. However, You will be involved as a first-hand witness to that Person's gradual incapacity and death. This will require an inevitable readjustment to continual change on your part. This is the common pattern in End-of-Life care.