Practical Guide to the Health Care System: How to visit someone in the hospital

When a friend or loved one is hospitalized, paying a visit is a wonderful way to show support. Here are things to remember so your time together is the very best it can be:

✦ Limit your visit to 15-30 minutes – especially if it is your first.
✦ To not overtax the patient with several visitors at once, arrange your visit in advance.
✦ Although most hospitals try to be as family-friendly as possible, children are not always allowed to visit all floors. Find out the specifics before you bring along a child.
✦ Don’t visit if you are ill. Have a telephone visit instead until you are feeling well yourself.
✦ Flowers, latex balloons and sweets are off limits for some.
✦ Often family members with unusual schedules can talk with the nurse to arrange visiting hours outside the standard.
✦ Respect the patient:
  - Knock before entering the room.
  - Don’t sit on the patient’s bed or lean on his/her wheelchair.
  - If the patient is asleep when you arrive, ask the nurse if you may awaken him/her.
  - Let the patient set the tone and pace of the conversation.
  - Don’t try to talk him/her out of any feelings he/she may express. Simply listen. That may be the best gift you can give.
✦ Be aware of your own feelings. Even if you are anxious or sad, accepting where you are allows you to focus on the patient.
✦ You need achieve nothing with this visit. Your mere presence speaks volumes. It is a most welcome balm to your loved one.

Caregiving and depression

Caring for a family member in need is an age-old act of love and loyalty. Because people live longer and more people live with chronic conditions, today there are more than 50 million caregivers in America. The demands on them can be relentless and sometimes lead to depression.

Recent Yale research revealed that nearly one-third of people caring for terminally ill loved ones suffer from depression themselves. Another study found that 41 percent of those who cared for a spouse with dementia experienced depression up to three years after that spouse died.

Changes in eating or sleeping patterns, loss of energy, becoming easily angered or agitated, low-level sadness for months – these are some of the symptoms. Early attention to them may keep a mild depression from becoming more serious.

Maintaining good health is imperative for caregivers. Sleep, exercise and a healthy diet can ward off physical problems, but emotional health is critical also. Family and friends can offer support and sometimes are just waiting to be asked to help. A caregiver support group on the Internet or in person may offer needed relief.

But self-care MUST come first. The loving kindness that caregivers offer their loved ones can continue only if they remain physically and emotionally healthy themselves. This self-care is anything but selfish. It is yet another generous act of love because it reduces the risk of emotional breakdown. Depression need not be a by-product of caregiving.

Prayer: Loving God, I thank you for those who tirelessly care for the ill and infirm. Keep me mindful of them so that I can ease their burdens with my friendship and my offers of help. Amen.

Resources: advocatehealth.com (Check your nearest Advocate hospital for caregiver support groups, adult day care centers and other helpful resources for caregivers) • caregiver.org • nimh.nih.gov (Free information on depression in English and Spanish) • wellspouse.org (Support for spouses/partners of the chronically ill and disabled)

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