



DISABILITIES

All residents of a care facility have some physical or mental disability. It helps if you discourage your friend from dwelling on his or her limitations. When a disabled person complains about a disability, you will want to show understanding, but try to move on to other subjects as soon as possible. Attention to matters beyond your friend's problems can diminish self-pity and lead to new, often gratifying experiences.

Wheelchair confinement: Bring yourself to eye level when communicating with people in wheelchairs so they may see and hear you more easily. (Likewise, stroke victims who are paralyzed on one side should be faced, whenever possible, on the uninvolved side.)

Hard of hearing: When you are talking with someone who is hard of hearing, be sure the lighting is adequate so that he or she may follow your lip movements and gestures. Speak in your normal voice, moving closer to your friend's ear rather than shouting. Avoid asking long questions or using complex sentences. Give the resident plenty of time to respond.

Visually impairment: Approach visually-impaired residents with a usual greeting so as not to startle them. Identify yourself at each encounter. Encourage your friend to be as independent as possible. When reading to a visually-impaired person, consult him or her about reading selections, making sure the material is of interest. Never leave a visually-impaired person without excusing yourself or saying goodbye.

Speech impediment: Often speech difficulties in the elderly result from a stroke or some other illness which suddenly deprives residents of the ability to communicate, leaving them with the feeling of having been cut off from the world. Some are able to write their thoughts, others may struggle to speak, while still others withdraw from any attempt to communicate. The key word with these people is patience. Speak naturally and wait for responses. Don't prompt them on words unless they seem hopelessly stuck. Restate what your friend has said to you so that he or she knows you understand. Don't do too much talking yourself, but convince your friend that you are interested in what he or she is trying to communicate.

Mental disabilities: The majority of people living in Skilled Nursing Facilities have some form of mental disability. This can be a challenging aspect of your LITA friendship. However, after you have taken the time to learn about the disability and to recognize deficit compensation techniques, be assured your LITA friendship will become that much more rewarding.

There are many kinds of mental disabilities. A person with short-term memory loss may have difficulty remembering recent events; those with moderate confusion may not know where they are or why they are there. People who are disoriented may be close to losing a sense of themselves. It is common for such residents to repeat questions and stories. These memory impairments have many causes—such as stroke, poor nutrition, Alzheimer's, or even lack of mental stimulation. If your friend does not seem to remember you from visit to visit, you should feel confident that your caring and attention are valuable nonetheless. You may wish to talk with facility staff. Often they can tell you about incidents of increased social interaction and reduced agitation, etc., which are a direct result of your LITA visit.

Mental illness sometimes is caused by chemical imbalances in the brain and medication therapy may be beneficial. If your friend has a mental illness such as depression, your commitment to regular visits is that much more important. Even though your friend may not be able to snap out the depression or name the cause of the sadness, you being present, accepting the mood of the day, and not questioning his or her feelings are a priceless gift.

As LITA friend, you have the unique opportunity to get to know your friend without expectations and pressure. Enjoy your friend as he or she is today; learn about his or her past. Your visits will make a difference.