

Caregiving in the age of the Corona Virus

By Nicki Mohammadi

It's never easy to watch your loved one get sick, even worse if they are in pain, but the ultimate defeat is when you can't physically be there with them to support them. As a caregiver, you may be feeling hopeless and powerless while social distancing keeps you from your loved one. But don't despair, while social distancing is in effect and must be followed there are ways to still support your loved ones from a distance. Here are some suggestions to show support, keep connected, and share experiences while your loved one is in the hospital.

The Benefits of Company

Maintaining close and meaningful relationships is a part of a healthy lifestyle and important in recovery. We cannot stress the importance of feeling loved and cared for while convalescing. Optimism and compassion from the caregiver are powerful and effective aids, even in this era of social distancing. Social distancing, even in a hospital scenario, does not have to mean social isolation. There are ways to stay engaged with your relatives and keep up their spirits. Let's turn social distancing into *distance socializing*.

The Rules

As of March 17th, 2020, Mount Sinai Health System and most hospitals in New York City implemented a strict visitor policy amid the COVID-19 outbreak. The rules were then modified and tightened on March 24th, 2020 due to the escalating situation and again on March 28th in partnership with New York State. They are as follows:

- All visitors are prohibited, including visitors to the emergency department, inpatient units, ambulatory sites and other facilities. With exception of:
 - Pediatrics and Pediatric ED: *One healthy visitor*
 - *Labor and Delivery: one healthy partner*
 - NICU: *One healthy adult visitor* for the duration of the hospitalization, no rotation

- End of Life situation: *One healthy visitor* and they may have a limit of one visitor per 24 hour period.
- Additional limitation for visiting COVID-19 positive patients: patients who are COVID-19 positive, under investigation or are under monitoring will not be allowed any visitors.
- Patients in the intensive care unit (ICU) are not allowed to receive flowers

Video Chats

Technology is your friend here. Whether it's Facetime, Zoom, Houseparty, Skype, or another platform, staying connected in our disconnected world is good for you. Studies have shown mimicking face-to-face interaction results in emotional benefits, by increasing feelings of empathy, connection and compassion. If video chatting isn't your thing, try sending video messages or voice calling.

Rave - Netflix with Friends

Sync your Netflix playback with your family and friends, wherever they may be. This may not be possible for patients who are critically ill, but it can help make the time pass for those who can use it. It is not limited to just Netflix; Youtube and Google Drive are all available to share content with each other and bring you together with your loved ones.

Practice Mindfulness

The world is in a stressful state, but while everything may seem in flux, we can still try to reduce our anxiety by focusing on the present. While we may be trying to find an escape from all this chaos, experts suggest that learning to focus on now can comfort the mind. Perhaps consider getting your loved one a subscription to a meditation app that can help them work through mindfulness meditation. Headspace, a popular meditation app, is offering free access and content during this period. Other meditation apps include Calm, Simple Habit, UCLA Mindful and Smiling Mind.

Connect With Their Healthcare Provider

Even though you can't physically be there with your relative, you can still be in the loop about their medical care. Ask your loved one if you can be added as a proxy on their electronic

medical records such as MyChart. While you can't be physically there to support your family member,, you can strive to be more involved with their providers to show your support. This is another area where video chatting can help with improving social connection.

Music Therapy

Although in-hospital music therapy services will be paused during this time, there are still options to reap the benefits of music. Music can have powerful effects on the mind. It helps to distract us from pain, lift our spirits, and serve as a catalyst in our recovery. Considering putting together a playlist for your loved one while they're in the hospital using platforms such as Spotify, SoundCloud, or Youtube. Many other musicians are opting to do concerts from their home via social media platforms in response to canceled festivals and events.

Caribu

Even though pediatric patients are allowed one visitor, we can offer them more. Caribu is currently offering free access and you can set up a virtual playdate for the little ones. Basically it's a facetime for kids but with lots of games. This can help in keeping them engaged and sane throughout their hospital stay.

Make Home Stress-Free

Eventually, all of this will end and you and your relatives will be reunited. This is not the point for them to return to piles of dirty dishes or a messy home. Prepare and clean their space so that it is a relaxing place for them to continue their recovery.

This is our chance to learn how to be alone together and how to support those we love from a distance. While we can no longer rely on body language, touch, and facial expression, we can still strive to mitigate their isolation and strengthen their care.