



## **OLD FRIENDS CLUB VOLUNTEER ORIENTATION**

Thank you for volunteering with us! Your presence, attention, patience, talents and experience shared with this group make an enormous difference in the lives of our members and their families. It is rewarding getting to know each person and the group as a whole. There are stories to share and gifts to reveal, and many sparkles of joyous laughter and surprising wisdom.

### **Guidelines for Old Friends Club Volunteers:**

- Promote an environment of joy where each Member, regardless of abilities, can participate in various activities and building relationships with one another.
- Create a welcoming, non-judgmental environment where each person feels comfortable and safe to express themselves.
- See the list of Communication Tips for when communicating doesn't come easy. Sometimes it takes patience and creativity, but the feeling of success when you understand each other feels great.
  
- Volunteers are crucial to the success of the program. You will know soon if this is a good fit for you, and if so we ask that you commit to a weekly 6-hour shift. That span is most helpful, but other options help too if that stretch of time is not possible. If you need to miss time that you are scheduled to volunteer please let us know as soon as possible.
- We encourage volunteers to actively participate in the various activities and, if comfortable, lead occasional activities. This adds variety and is greatly helpful if there is a situation that requires the attention of both staff members.
- You are encouraged to step in and assist as you learn to anticipate the needs of the members and of the person facilitating the activity. This often becomes second nature as we all get to know one another and build skills working as a team.
- Respect of everyone involved with Old Friends Club is one of our core values. We work for an atmosphere infused with fun and cooperation and want to maintain that environment. If you ever feel or witness inappropriate treatment by staff, members, or other volunteers that you cannot comfortably resolve, please bring the issue to the attention of the Activity Director or to the Executive Director, Karen Koenig (425-761-2946). Our desire is to resolve conflict quickly and professionally.

## COMMUNICATION TIPS

Our members represent a broad range of ability and are in various stages of disease that affects communication or judgment. Working with those who are higher functioning feels natural—they of course want to be treated normally. But as some diseases progress it can take some creativity and patience. Here are some ideas when working with those who are moving toward later stages:

Your approach makes a difference:

- Come from the front and move slowly
- Introduce yourself and use their name
- Move to the side
- Offer direct eye contact. Get low if you need to.
- Offer your hand, palm up.
- Speak slowly and clearly, and in a low, warm, social tone.
- Wait for a response.

When talking together:

- Use their preferred name.
- Talk to the person as an adult.  
(Avoid “Elder Speak” terms such as sweetie, honey, dear...)
- Ask one question at a time.  
(Here is your chair.... Would you like some coffee? Instead of “Would you like to sit down and have some coffee?”)
- Use names of people, places and things instead of it/he/she/that  
(“Here is your coat” instead of “Here it is.”)
- Give choices whenever possible. Limit to two.
- Don’t give a choice when there really isn’t one.  
(“Let’s wash hands,” instead of “Do you want to wash your hands?”)
- Don’t argue.  
(The cost of winning isn’t worth it for either of you.)
- It’s not always necessary to correct them.  
(If they need a spoon and ask for a knife, give them the spoon and quietly celebrate that they found a word in the silverware family.)
- Listen for the meaning and feeling behind the words.
- Recognize the past becomes their current reality.
- Go into their world instead of making them join ours.

## COGNITIVE CHANGES

Here are some common cognitive changes that may impact how the person with dementia interacts with the world:

- **Vision**: As the disease progresses the brain processes what the eyes take in differently. The brain compensates by limiting the information. Peripheral vision shrinks, eventually seeming more like binocular vision. How does this play out? A dark shadow or rug on the floor may be taken for a hole. The plate across the table might seem more accessible than the one right in front of them.
- **Hearing**: hearing loss makes dementia more difficult. When someone has both, it is even more important to thing about your physical position, tone of voice, and speed of speech when talking with them. Make sure they can see you on their own level, speak slowly and clearly, and be conscious of your volume. Don't yell, just speak up.
- **Mobility**: Even if physically fit, balance may be affected. Someone may shuffle, or feel out the steps ahead (often related to vision.) Someone with Parkinsonism may freeze in doorways or be unable to get forward momentum. (A half step back before moving forward sometimes helps.)
- **Nutrition**: The sense of taste (and smell) diminish often leaving the bitter taste buds as the strongest sensors. That means a craving for sweets! (There are probably other reasons too.) Some may feel hungry after a big meal, or have no appetite even if they haven't eaten. The signals just don't reach the brain. Making meals social, fun and natural can help. Watching others eat can trigger a mirrored response.
- **Safety**: Judgment is compromised with dementia. We have to be more vigilant about where someone steps, or what they put in their mouth, for example. Redirecting can be a challenge, but like anyone they will respond to respect: "will you walk with me?" or "help me paint this tree" (instead of tasting paint). Humor often helps too.
- **Filters**: Don't be surprised by words or a topic of conversation that seems out of character. Play along if no one is offended. Remember, they're adults and foul language and naughty conversations are allowed—they just may have forgotten where or with whom. Keep that sense of humor!
- **Memory**: Dementia isn't simply memory loss. Short-term memory loss is often one of the first markers, but long-term memories can be sparked well into late stages. The reminiscing activities we do in the program plays to this strength. Be willing to go back to the past with them as if it is the current moment. It is not necessary to orient them to the present. For example, if they ask for home or a specific person, ask them to tell you more. Engage the present thoughts.

Hopefully this list of ideas and information is helpful. It really is rewarding to help someone feel understood and more like themselves. People living with dementia show an inspiring amount of courage and resilience. They teach us to live fully in the moment.