

What to Say and Do with an Older Person in Your Life

Ever visit a Grandma or Grandpa and not know what to say or do? Maybe this important person in your life lives in their own home, independent living, assisted living or a nursing home. Isn't it crazy, we sometimes run out of things to talk about with an older person and often don't know what to do either? Here are some ideas. Use them as you wish and as spring boards for your own creativity.

First and foremost think about this person, what is special and unique about them? What do you love about them? Think of ways to bring that out.

Think of how to make him/her laugh, you know, be creative, be sneaky. My Mom chose to be called Mor Mor instead of Grandma. Mor Mor is Swedish for Grandma. My great Aunt grew up speaking Swedish but didn't like it so when she hears Mor Mor she expresses her feelings, "Oh ish." So what do I do? Say it on purpose to get a rise out of her. She says it's awful. Why would she think that? Well, translated literally Mor Mor means "mother's mother." I contend that when we say it she hears us say, "Mother's Mother, can you come here please. Mother's Mother is there any coffee left?" And that would sound awful if said that way which is how she hears it. So, contemplate the idea of getting a rise out of someone, not making them angry of course, but getting a laugh out of it. My great Aunt eventually laughs with us since we are laughing so hard about it.

Think of how to get someone to tell stories. Even if you've heard them a million times, get the same stories rolling. Then make it your goal to hear some new ones if possible. You have to ask the questions though. Be ready. Think about it before your visit. Have some questions ready and get good at open ended ones instead of eliciting "yes" or "no."

Get a prompt for yourself. Do you remember a craze with books like *Grandma Tell me Your Memories*, somewhere in the 1990's. I bought one and asked my Grandma the questions when we were in the car and wrote down her answers. I have a long list of quoted memories from my Grandma. My cousins bought my Grandma a similar book but "she never filled it out." Exactly. Buy one and let it be prompts to you for asking good questions. Rich stories and memories will pour out. When I asked my Grandma what toys were her favorite, she replied with, "Toys? Toys? Who had toys? We played with wooden spoons and dirt. You kids have too many toys."



Can you get the person to tell jokes? If they are a joke teller ask for their latest. Come prepped with a few of your own which may prompt them to remember some. No matter who tells them, laughter is the best medicine.

Can you get your family member to speak in a different language? Ask them for a few words or quips in your family's native tongue. Learn a few on your own and ask if you are pronouncing them correctly.

Most of us all sing now and then, how could you creatively get this person to sing something? With background music? With someone playing a piano or keyboard? Could you teach a short song or have your kid sing one? Little kid songs are cute but could you also add a meaningful song, patriotic song? Could your older friend or relative teach some older songs such as hymns or gospel songs?

Could you get the person to recite something? Did they have to memorize certain passages when they were young and can they still recite them? Something many people have is long term memories and skills which may surprise and delight you. Do a little thinking about it. What might they have memorized and could say if you started it? The Gettysburg Address, passages from the Bible, hymns, quotes?

Is there a way to get your relative to read something to someone? Little kids are read to all the time, could Grandpa or Grandma do the reading? Could another child read to the group? Could you get people to read parts with flair?

Most older people have skills of a lifetime that could be imparted to you. What would you like to learn from them before they can't teach it to you anymore? Wouldn't many of us who no longer have our grandparents be thrilled to have them explain how to make something or describe in detail what to do to create a famous dish or dessert? Take advantage of their knowledge.



Better yet, find a way to bake the cinnamon rolls your *Grandma* is famous for or ribs your *Grandpa* is known for. Most long term care settings have a stove somewhere that you could ask to use. Be insistent. Advocate for meaning and purpose in their life.

If your family member always had cookies or candy to offer others, help them have it still. Help them create the candy dish they have always had. Help them host others. Bring candy for them to fill it. If your *Grandma* always had a guest book, make sure she has one. If your grandparents always sent cards for birthdays, offer to help get them ready with them.

Most importantly, take advantage of their wisdom. Share a problem or struggle, ask their advice. You honor them when you do this and we will learn and grow from their own mistakes, lessons learned and wise advice.

And last but not least pull out the photo albums. Get as many details as you can on all the pictures, write them down and if nothing else just enjoy them together.

There is an old African proverb that when an elder dies, a library burns. Don't let the library burn before your very eyes burn down before you get out of it every story and tip you can nor before you fill it with every ounce of love and attention you possibly can.

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