

What Brings You Comfort in Good Times and Bad?

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“Cure Sometimes, Treat Often, Comfort Always”

~Hippocrates

What is your favorite place in the whole world? Where do you find the most comfort? Is it your home, backyard, church, coffee shop, parent’s house? What is it about this place that provides you with the feeling that there’s no other place on earth quite like it?

Places provide comfort for a variety of reasons. It may be the people that are in these places, your family and friends that know you best and always seem to know what to say to make you feel better. It may be the things that line the shelves and fill the walls. Maybe you have a collection of seashells gathered from fun-filled days at the beach that remind you of building sand castles with your kids, or a collection of worn leather books that remind you of days lost reading with a warm cup of tea in hand. Maybe it’s the pictures of your loved ones that fill the walls that bring a smile to your face every time you look at them. Or maybe it is just the feeling you get when you are in that particular place or space. A feeling of love, peace, joy, safety.

Whatever the case may be, we all have a place where we feel comfortable and most at home. It is a place that provides us with comfort both in good times and bad.

I once worked as a marketing coordinator in a brand new assisted living complex. The building was still under construction and I was leasing the units. I met with a woman whose first question was “What color are the walls?” When I replied that they would be painted gray, I immediately sensed that something was wrong. She replied “I can’t live with gray walls. That’s the one color I can’t have in my home.” I assured her I would see what I could do and was quite confident that changing the paint color wouldn’t be an issue. Surely, the relationship with this potential client and meeting her needs would come first. Much to my disappointment, I was told that all of the walls would be painted gray with no exceptions allowed. I was flabbergasted that the management was so inflexible. They put their agenda first and stuck to their guns with no good reason provided. The next day, I had to call the woman and tell her that they wouldn’t allow her to choose her own paint color. Not surprisingly, she decided to move elsewhere.

Why do I tell you this story? Because as human beings we all have preferences, likes, dislikes, needs, and wants. What makes you feel comfortable may be completely different from what makes me feel comfortable. We all have gray walls, the things that for whatever reason, we don’t like about a place. Does it matter why this woman didn’t like gray walls? No, I didn’t ask. Preferences are preferences for a reason and are part of what makes each person a unique individual.

How does this apply to a person with dementia? When caring for a person with dementia, we are often trying to put together the pieces of the puzzle. What is going on with this person at this particular time? One of the pieces that often gets ignored is the environment. We fail to recognize that the environment plays a critical role in how a person feels, reacts, and behaves. We forget that a person with dementia also has preferences that don't disappear just because they have dementia.

Teepa Snow has created the Four Fs and Four Ss to help us assess the environment. Stop and think. Is the environment:

Friendly – does the space look warm and inviting? Are the people friendly? Do they smile and say kind words? A person with dementia will know if you don't like them by the tone of your voice and facial expressions.

Familiar – Does the person with dementia see anything that is familiar to them? Do they have any favorite photos or objects that belong to them? Do people call them by name when speaking to them?

Functional- Is it functional in terms of what the person wants and needs to do within the space? Does the space function well for personal care? Recreational time? Does the space provide the person with activities that give meaning and purpose each day?

Forgiving – Is the person allowed to make mistakes or are they scolded each time they do something that is deemed bad, risky, or inappropriate? Is there a high risk of injury or accidents if a mistake is made?

The four Ss help us to understand how a person with dementia will interpret the:

Space – Are people in his or her intimate, personal, public spaces?

Sensations – Do they like what they see, hear, feel, smell, taste?

Surfaces – Are the surfaces comfortable for them to sit, stand, lie down, work?

Social – Are there people and activities that the person likes?

Next time you are in a situation and trying to solve a puzzle, take a look around and consider the Four Fs and Four Ss. Also, take a step back and think about where you may be putting up gray walls and pushing your own agenda rather than meeting the needs, likes, and wants of the person you care for.