



Intimacy in Long-Term Care: Ensuring Resident Happiness, Health, and Safety

While intimacy is common in assisted living communities, dialogue about it isn't. And that can lead to challenges with residents and families, from health concerns to potential safety issues that could even result in lawsuits. The key to avoiding potential problems is to have a policy in place. Here are the top 5 considerations when developing guidelines for your community.

- 1. Put a policy in writing.** Most communities don't have a policy. But it's essential to have one in place in case the state pays a visit. Be proactive and create a policy, agreement, or permission form – whatever format you decide to adopt. Since the more language you include, the more you have to defend yourself, keep your policy short. Deb Choma, RN, Director of Member Services, AALNA, who presents regularly on sexuality among long-term care residents, suggests some adaptation of the following: "We create a caring, supportive and nurturing environment for the persons and families we serve so they are fully respected for their uniqueness. We encourage them to treat each other with dignity and kindness and to respect their personal choices."
- 2. Get resident and family buy in.** Make it part of your admission process to share your policy with incoming residents and family members. And have them read and sign the agreement. Make sure they understand, however, that just because intimacy is permitted, violence is not tolerated. This means staff will take steps, like leaving a room door open, to make sure residents aren't harmed in any way.
- 3. Offer resident support.** Consider testing new residents for STIs upon admission to encourage safe contact. Hold groups or gatherings on sexuality and invite doctors or health educators in. Offer support to help them fulfill their needs

such as condoms you pass around during group or transport for them to purchase movies or other items. And encourage residents to talk to staff or their doctor if they're interested in medication options such as PEDs.

- 4. Educate staff.** Sexuality should be part of a resident's care plan so be sure to train your staff to notice if a resident is involved in aggressive contact. For example, if staff members shower or change residents, train them to notice bruises, abrasions, or other signs of overly physical behavior and initiate a conversation privately about the situation.
- 5. Talk to families.** When you share your policy, give examples of how it may come into play. For example, if their loved one suffers from dementia, family members may see them holding hands with a man or woman other than their spouse. Update them regularly on what's going on in the resident's private life, such as who they are spending time with. And encourage them to ask if they have questions. "The key is to make them comfortable with it and make sure they know the resident is safe," says Choma.

While many communities choose to sweep sexuality under the rug, being open, honest, and upfront about your policies can demonstrate your respect for your residents and their relationships. And that can go a long way to boosting resident – and family – satisfaction and your reputation in the market.

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