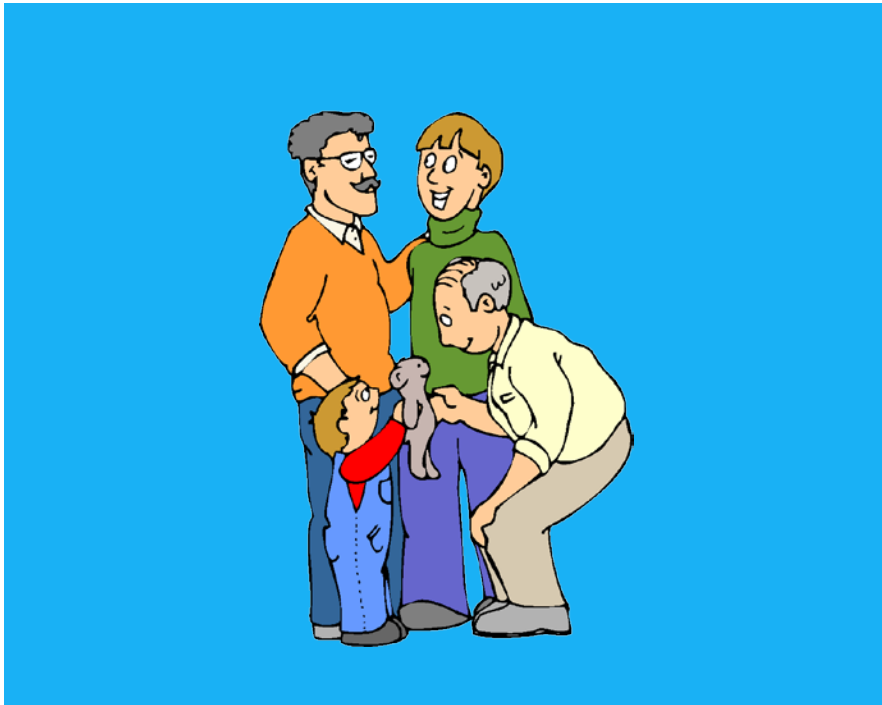


Let's Visit Grandpa in Extended Care



By Elizabeth Ruiz

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Your Grandpa is in Extended Care – Now What?.....	3
Dealing with Your Feelings.....	4
Preparing for a Visit.....	6
Visiting Day.....	11
Keeping Grandpa in Your Life.....	18
Resources.....	20

Your Grandfather is in Extended Care – Now What?

When you find out your elderly parent, grandparent or dear friend is headed to an extended care facility you are likely filled with emotional turmoil. Worry, concern, guilt, anxiety and stress may overwhelm you. You may not be sure how to respond and not know what to expect when your loved one requests a visit.

First you need to consider your loved one's condition. Is he recovering from an illness or injury and expected to return home after physical rehabilitation? Or is your loved one adjusting to a new life in a care center due to medical needs and health limitations? Or is the situation much worse and your loved one is terminally ill and not expected to return home?

Knowing your loved one's situation and condition will make a big difference to the tone of your visits. You may be helping your relative/friend focus on successfully completing physical therapy despite obstacles so he can return back home. Or if the change in living situation is permanent you will need to help your loved one make the transition to a new living environment. If your loved one is not expected to survive then you will be focused on keeping his last days comfortable and positive.

During the rest of the book I will refer to the loved one in an extended care facility or nursing home as either Grandpa or Grandfather. This information applies to all elderly individuals: Grandmothers, Mothers, Grandfathers, Fathers, Aunts, Uncles, siblings, and friends but I am writing from the perspective of my experiences visiting my own Grandfather since he ended up in an extended care center before his passing away.

Dealing with Your Feelings

You may have concerns about visiting your Grandfather because of your own conflicted feelings about his changed situation. The thought of visiting a care center filled with declining elderly ones can be filled with discomfort, guilt and dread. It's ok to feel uncomfortable. Visit your Grandfather anyway as you are a valuable lifeline to him.

Don't be afraid to cry or feel sad about the new situation. It's a big life change for you and your Grandfather and will take some emotional adjustment. It can help to speak with friends who have dealt with similar situations and learn how they coped. You can learn good tips to help you with your feelings and help you feel comfortable visiting your Grandfather.

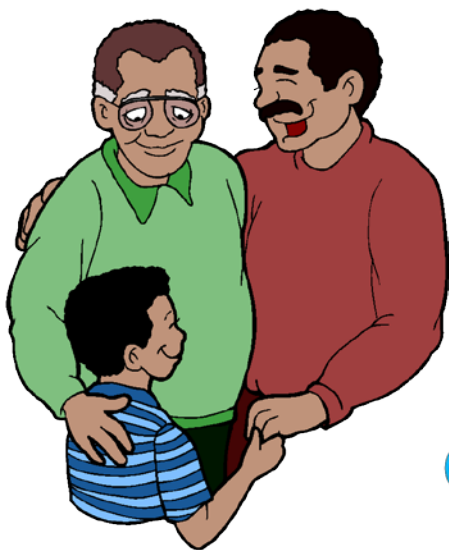
If you are sad because your Grandfather is not expected to recover and may die soon, focus instead on making the person's last days happy rather than avoid visiting. Suddenly cutting this person out of your life will be devastating and bewildering to your Grandpa.

If your Grandpa is used to regular visits or phone calls when he was still able to live at home the sudden cessation of contact will have a negative impact on his emotional well-being and make his last days miserable as well as lonely. You can reach out to support groups including hospice and even receive counseling from a therapist if that is what is needed to help deal with the situation while you make the effort to visit your dear Grandfather.

Perhaps you feel troubled about how to handle Grandpa asking you to take him home. Acknowledge to yourself that the questions may make you feel sad or guilty about leaving your Grandfather in a care facility. It is still important to visit him regardless of whether or not he pleads to be taken back home. Instead, plan ahead for awkward questions so you will have a reasonable answer ready.

At different periods during my Grandfather's stay in an extended care facility when he asked to be taken home I had reasonable answers ready. Once I told him he would need to complete his course of IV antibiotics before he could return home. He didn't like the answer but he accepted it.

The key is to be prepared for the possibility of awkward questions and know what you want to say in advance.



It is vital to maintain your relationship with Grandpa while he is in extended care.

Preparing for a Visit:

Choosing Days and Times to Visit Grandpa

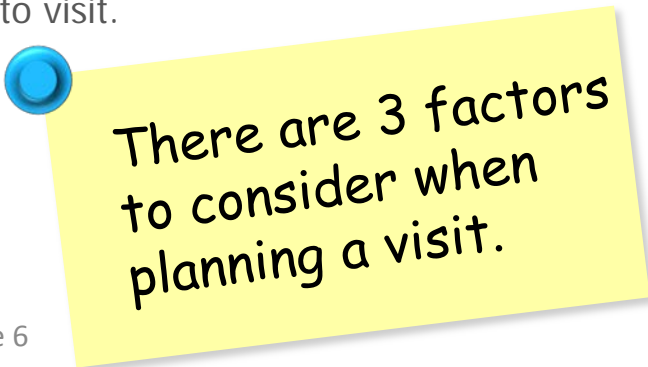
The first thing you should do is find out the facility's visiting hours and policies. Many places have very flexible visiting hours so your Grandfather can receive visitors throughout the day and early evening.

Next you should ask your Grandfather when he wants you to come for a visit. Asking him gives him the dignity of choosing the time and day of visit. Be sure to come when you say you will. Your visit can be the highlight of your Grandfather's day or week.

If you don't show up he will be confused and upset and disappointed. If you have to cancel your visit, call your Grandfather as soon as possible and explain why you cannot make your visit and schedule a new visit day and time.

You may want to speak with the nurses and aides and find out what times of day your Grandpa is most alert and able to accept visitors. You don't want to show up when he is busy doing physical therapy or being bathed or is very fatigued from completing physical therapy.

Some individuals are more alert in the morning and others the afternoon or even early evening making a dinner time meal visit ideal. Once you know a bit more about when your Grandfather is available and alert, then you can coordinate with his wishes about when to visit.



There are 3 factors to consider when planning a visit.

Preparing for a Visit:

Prepare Young Children for a Visit

If you have young children you want to bring for visits with your grandfather it is important to prepare them for what to expect during a visit. Explain why the beloved Grandpa is in the extended care facility. You don't need to go into too explicit details if the children are very young and the elderly one is dying. Explain only that health issues require Grandpa needing 24 hour medical care and he needs to be at the facility to receive that care.

You also want to explain the importance of the visit. Remind the children of a time when they looked forward to visiting Grandpa at his home and how important their visit now is for Grandpa while he is in the new living situation. Take care to explain any special behaviors needed during the visit. Hugs are ok, but yelling loudly and running may disturb the other residents. Teach children respectful visiting behaviors and what to expect if Grandpa is suffering from dementia so they won't be frightened.

You may want to involve your children in planning activities for the visit or even have them help choose a gift for Grandpa to get them interested in visiting.

If you have teenagers to take on the visit you can explain more about Grandpa's condition and also stress the value they bring to the visit. Remind them of activities they enjoyed with their Grandpa and they can either spend time doing those activities or sharing memories about the enjoyable activities. It's not a time to spend absorbed on their smartphone but a time to engage with Grandpa during the visit.

Preparing for a Visit: Planning Activities for Visits

Many Care Facilities have group activities scheduled on a weekly or monthly basis. If your Grandfather is mobile and well enough to participate you can find out which activities visitors are encouraged to engage in with the residents. If your Grandfather is not mobile then you can plan things to do in his room.

See Worksheet 1 for ideas of things to do during your visit. With our lives so busy and hectic you may not quickly remember all your loved ones favorite things. You can bring favorite treats, meals, or plan activities based on Grandpa's favorites.

Worksheet 1: Use this worksheet to help you plan activities during visits.

Grandpa's Favorite Things		
Meals:	Snacks:	Colors:
Books:	Hobbies:	Sports: (Watch Games on TV)
TV shows:	Movies:	Colors: (Bring gifts/clothes)

You may also need to bring a few necessary items for your relative’s use that are not provided by the facility. See the list of items that are handy to have during your visits.

Worksheet 2: List of things to bring for use during visits

Items to Bring	Why You Need Them
Antibacterial wipes	Keep hands clean.
Disinfectant wipes	Things get dropped on floor and need cleaning.
Mirror and comb	Keep Grandpa’s hair nice and neat.
Tissues	Use as napkins and for Grandpa’s allergies
Toothpicks (Plastic not wood)	Grandpa may like to keep his teeth clean
Nose hair trimmer	It’s too dangerous to use scissors.
Extra clothes (Socks, sweaters, pajamas)	In case they need extra clothes for food spills or other messes so they can have clean clothes and not have to wear hospital gowns.
Extra blankets	In case Grandpa gets cold and wants a thicker blanket or a favorite blanket.
Straps to clip items to bed	Sold for children to attach items to strollers. Use if Grandpa likes to toss things on floor.
Lunch bags	Use for trash bags when Grandpa can’t reach trash can.
Chair cushion	Use on your chair during visit. You may have to sit on a hard folding chair.
Radio (or MP3 player if Grandpa can operate it.)	Enjoy music during your visit and for Grandpa to listen to when he’s alone.
Computer or tablet	If Grandpa can use technology might be helpful but label and keep out of view in case of stealing or take with you when you leave and bring back on next visit.
Pens (writing and permanent markers)	Permanent markers can be used to label belongings and regular pens for writing notes or letters.
Guest book	Visitors can leave notes in case Grandpa is sleeping when they stop by.
Note pad	Sometimes you need to write notes down or leave notes.
Reading Material	Bring books, magazines or something else to read to Grandpa that he would enjoy.

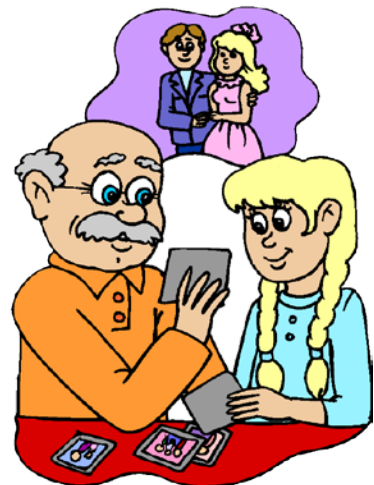
Visiting Day: Activities During Your Visit

Greet your grandfather cheerfully with a hug, kiss, or handshake as appropriate. Physical contact is vital to your family member. The only other contact he may receive will be from strangers doing their jobs changing blankets, bandages and bathing. It can be very isolating for your grandparent in the facility. Loving human contact is an important part of staying connected for your Grandfather.

If your grandfather is physically able to leave the facility you can plan ahead to take them out for a meal at a restaurant or for a scenic drive or to watch a movie or sporting event. You may need to keep the initial visit short until you can gauge your loved ones energy level.

Other things you can do during a visit are:

- Share a meal. (Bring your own food while they eat their lunch or bring meals for you both. The care facility might charge you for your meal or not provide meals for visitors.)
- Call relatives on telephone who aren't able to visit frequently for your Grandfather to speak to on telephone.
- Can you dial in to worship services for your grandfather to listen in on telephone?
- Read out loud to your grandparent from something they would enjoy reading like a favorite book or the Bible.
- Look through photos and remember good times.
- Watch a baseball, soccer or football game on TV.
- Play a game of cards, or checkers, or chess.
- Listen to music together and sing along.



Prepare for the Unexpected

Are there potential language issues?

Be prepared for the possibility of your bilingual grandpa to revert to his primary language if you are not fluent. You may want to review a few key phrases ahead of your visit just in case and even download a translating app to your smart phone.

My Grandfather fell back into his primary language of Spanish after a lifetime of speaking to me in English. I had to work hard to recall and use my Spanish since I am not fluent in the language. I ended up downloading language translation apps on my smart phone and practicing phrases and questions at home so we could communicate when I visited him. Depending on his mood and health Grandpa would revert to English randomly. The caregivers were able to occasionally get him to answer their questions in English.

I even asked Grandpa why he no longer spoke English. He said because he couldn't. I wasn't sure if it was the pain medication, his dementia, or declining health that made it hard for him to speak English so I worked hard on speaking to him in Spanish. Several times the staff wanted me to translate for them and I did my best in my broken Spanish.

What if your Grandfather gets sick during the visit?

Your grandfather may have some minor health issue come up. For example stomach discomfort that causes vomiting. Make sure he has a basin, trash can or even a cup handy so as not to make a mess. Alert the staff right away of the issue and also let them know if your grandparent's clothes need changing or if they need new bed sheets. The sudden sickness may cut your visit short or possibly extend your visit if you need to wait for the doctor to show up. Do what you can to soothe your relative and try not to look repulsed by the mess he makes while sick. No doubt Grandpa is mortified by being unexpectedly sick so you need to stay calm and be reassuring.

Visiting Day: Be Flexible About the Length of Your Visit

Depending on the condition of your grandfather a visit is unlikely to be a brief ten or 20 minutes. Maybe you only planned to be there 30 minutes to an hour but things happen. If his mood is sad or depressed you may need to stay longer in effort to cheer him up. If he pleads with you to not to leave this may further extend your visit because leaving sooner may cause him agitation and distress.

If you have a flexible schedule, be willing to stay and not get upset or irritated with your grandfather. Imagine how you would feel in his place, isolated from family and home and surrounded by strangers. You are the connection to his former life and during that particular visit he may need more attention than usual.

Or sometimes you may need to stay longer to ensure the nurses or aides complete a task for your grandparent because they are busy taking care of other residents. Many times I had to wait 30 to 45 minutes until the nurses could bring Grandpa his pain medication or the aides could shift his position in the bed or change clothes he stained with juice or food.

Be patient but persistent. If you leave before having the situation is taken care of your grandparent's needs may get lost in the hectic schedule of care for the many residents.

You may need to politely but firmly remind the staff about your grandparent's immediate needs as they are very busy. If your grandparent is annoyed at the delay remind him that the staff is occupied taking care of others and will come soon. Encourage him to use the call button when he needs help.

Waiting for help lets the staff know how much you care about your grandfather's needs and they will take better care of your grandfather when you are not around. It's a sad fact but residents without regular visitors often do not get as much attention as one's whose families are actively involved in their care.

Visiting Day: Coping with Roommates

Introduce yourself and say hello to your loved one's roommates. Private rooms are costly and depending on your Grandfather's financial situation he will likely have to share a room with a stranger. Getting to know the person who shares the room will improve the situation for everyone.

Maintain a cordial relationship with the roommate so when issues arise communication will be positive. Be prepared to ask them to lower the TV volume or dim lights on your grandfather's request and ask politely. If you've cultivated a positive acquaintanceship ahead of time the roommate will be more accommodating about things like turning down the volume or opening windows for fresh air.

Also the roommate may not get frequent visitors and may be lonely. A cheerful hello can brighten their day. They can also keep you informed about your grandparent. If your grandfather has a rough night the roommate can let you know so you can adjust your plans for the visit and potentially keep things low key or more upbeat or even shorten the visit if Grandpa is tired.

The roommate can also let you know if one of the aides mistreats your grandparent. I had a situation arise where one aide was annoyed by the language barrier and my grandfather's refusal to eat. He would berate my grandfather at meal times and on a specific occasion he was rough and unconcerned about the pain he caused when changing my grandfather's adult diapers. My grandfather had a broken hip and pressure sores that needed delicate handling.

Once the roommate told me about the situation I spoke to the nurses and requested that the aide in question never again be assigned to assist my grandfather. I had noticed the aid had a petulant attitude but did not realize his behavior would border on abusive.

Visiting Day: More on Dealing with Roommates

I would never have found out about the negative care situation without the roommate's help. My grandfather wasn't one to complain about anyone and did not tell me about the aide's bad behavior during our visit. Knowing your loved one's roommate can be a good for his care. I ended up bringing snack treats for this kind roommate who kept an eye out for my grandfather.

On the opposite end of the roommate spectrum are the thieves and the exhibitionists. Be sure to label food containers and property of your grandfather so it doesn't disappear. Don't leave anything of value out in the open for anyone to see and try to steal. Let the facility staff know if items go missing.

If the roommate acts inappropriately inform the staff immediately so they can deal with the situation. One of Grandpa's rotating roommates while he was still in the rehabilitation wing, enjoyed flashing his genitals to females. He came very close to exposing himself to me which initially I thought was an accident.

After speaking to the aides they explained he enjoyed exposing himself and they went and closed the curtain around his bed. Be aware of these potential situations in case you bring young children with you and be prepared to close the curtain yourself if indecent exposure will happen faster than you can get an aide's attention.

Some of the elderly residents have dementia and enjoy exposing themselves to other visitors who happen by. Be sure to alert the staff when you stumble upon such behavior so they can deal with it.

Dealing with Facility Staff

It is important to get to know the people who care for your grandparent on a daily basis. Introduce yourself and explain how often you plan to visit. This lets facility staff know you are concerned about your grandfather's care and they will be sure to take good care of him.

- Say thank you for facility staff's hard work.
- Be open about issues that may arise with your loved one.
- Ask for help when your grandfather needs it.
- Ask questions about your loved one's condition. If he seem to be upset or unusually tired, ask about what happened during the hours or days before your visit.
- If the employees do exceptional work and do extra tasks for your grandfather be sure to let their supervisors know about it. Some facilities have comment cards where you can leave positive feedback about employees.

Ask the staff where extra blankets, wash cloths, tissues and cups are stored so you can get them for your grandparent during your visit. They are often too busy to immediately provide these items so if you know where the linen closet is located you can get the items yourself quickly.

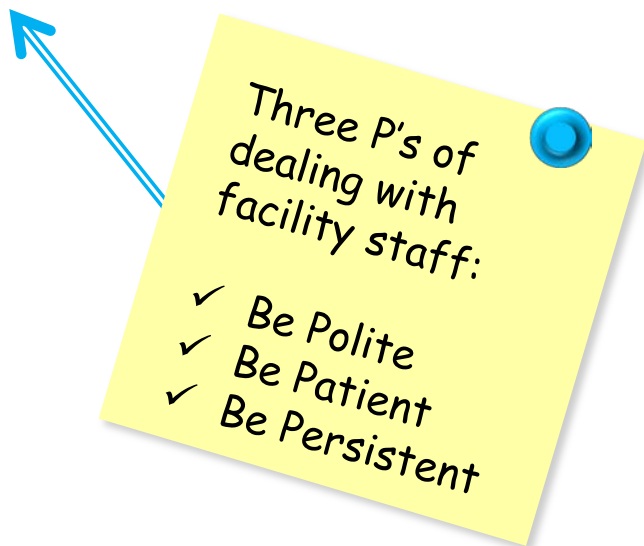
My Grandpa would get impatient when he was cold and wanting extra blankets and the aides couldn't come right away. I asked where the linen closet was located and during each visit I could bring him as many extra blankets as he needed to feel warm.

Additional Tips on Dealing with Facility Staff

If the room doesn't have extra chairs you can ask the staff for a chair and they will either show you where chairs are stored or bring one depending on their work load. Having a chair for you to sit on can improve your visit significantly.

Dealing with staff can be an exercise in patience. Be prepared to wait for staff to handle your issues. They care for many residents and it can take more than a minute to get your grandfather assistance if it's not a medical emergency.

Little good is accomplished by being rude or belligerent with the staff. It could negatively impact the care they give your grandfather if they start to associate problems and negativity with him because of your rude behavior. You want faster response times not a slower response to your grandfather.



Keeping Grandpa in Your Life: Incorporating Visits Into Your Life Schedule

Plan to make regular visits according to your availability: daily, weekly or monthly. If you can arrange for other family members to also visit weekly, then your grandfather can get several visits each week that will help him feel less lonely.

Also remind friends and congregation members to visit too. Your grandfather is eager to maintain contact with you and family and friends. His life has changed and he may have a lot of time on his hands so as many visits as you and others can make are very important.

Consider how you would feel stuck alone in a hospital with no family or friends around and surrounded by strangers to take care of you. Your grandfather feels the same loneliness and sense of isolation so making time to keep the relationship intact by visiting regularly is important.

We all have relationships where we participate in activities we may not enjoy but we do it for the other person. Visiting Grandpa frequently may fall under this category and need not be avoided or resented.



Keeping Grandpa in Your Life:

Accept that Your Relationship has Changed but Still Needs Care

Role reversal – You are now care giver. It may feel awkward as you recall how Grandpa carried you as a child and being someone you admired all your life. Now he is frail and weak and needing your support.

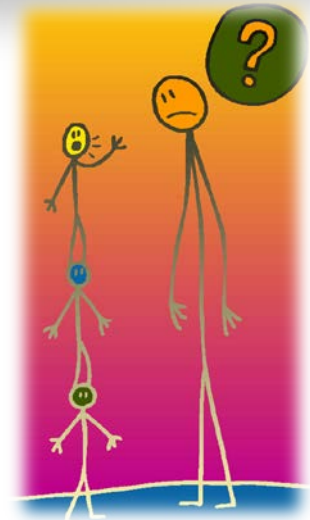
At times he may act like a needy child and not an adult. It can make you tearful or feel frustrated. Get help coping with the changes if you have trouble accepting the new situation on your own.

Despite the change in roles, it is worth the effort to adjust to the change in your relationship.

Dealing with Dementia or memory loss –

Go with the flow and don't always correct Grandpa. Be gentle when reminding him what day, month or even year it currently is. I was devastated when my grandfather forgot how many years it had been since my Father, his son, had passed away. I didn't show my upset but merely explained how many years since and even the exact date my father had died. Grandpa was surprised at how much time had passed. One really bad day he didn't even recognize his son from a photograph. That was especially sad since I knew he adored my Father. I calmly reminded him it was his son and when he seemed surprised and uncomprehending I changed the subject.

Introduce yourself to Grandpa at the start of each visit to help him remember you.



Remind them who you are at the start of the visit. During the first four days of visits my Grandpa didn't recognize me, which made me very sad. I began each visit with "Hi Grandpa it's ..." to help him remember my name and relationship to him.

Bring old photos so he can remember you. I also brought several childhood photos of me and my siblings so he would recognize us in adult photos that he'd been unable to do during previous visits. I stuck them on the bulletin board in his room and also brought framed photos for him.

I used inexpensive frames because Grandpa had a tendency to knock things over and break them. This way I could easily replace a broken frame with little stress or expense. Ordering prints of photos can be very cheap if you use Shutterfly.com or even Costco.

Be prepared for bad days as well as good days. Some days his mood or health may be so bad that the visit doesn't feel productive or positive. Accept it and plan for the next visit to be better. Some days can be fun and positive and filled with laughter. Focus on those visits to keep you visiting regularly, not on the bad visits which make you reluctant to return.



I posted family photos on the bulletin board in Grandpa's room.

Continue to make positive memories -

Take selfies and text photos to family and friends. Grandpa and I would take fun selfies and sometimes I took photos of him so I could share with family how he was doing during that specific visit. It helped keep family involved and encouraged them to make more regular visits.

Photograph your grandfather having fun during visits. When my Grandma or sister would visit at the same time I would take photos of them with Grandpa. These photos will be cherished in years to come.

If possible you may want to start writing down important memories and family history based on questions you ask your grandfather during visits. As his memory and mood allowed, I would ask Grandpa about his life. I knew there would be few chances to do that as time went on and once he passed away the opportunity to learn more of our family history from his perspective would be gone.

Unfortunately, his dementia and our language barriers often made getting answers to my questions difficult. Your situation may be similar or may be better. You may want to prepare some questions ahead of time if getting answers is really important to you.



The oversized orange sunglasses made Grandpa laugh.

Resources:

You Need to Ask and Find Out What Services are Available at the Facility

Is there a Beauty salon or barbershop onsite and what do they charge for each service?

Depending on the facility and the workload of the aides you may be able to get an aide to shave your Grandpa rather than having the onsite barbershop do it for a fee.

Do they pay for private phone lines or does family need to pay for a phone line to be set up?

When my Grandfather was in the rehabilitation/recovery wing of the care center the phone line was included in his room. However, once he transitioned to long term care, the phone service needed to be paid for by the resident and was not provided for by the facility.

Find out ahead of time so your Grandfather isn't cut off from family and friends without telephone access. Depending on your Grandfather's mental state he may not be able to keep track of a cellphone which could be lost in the laundry or dropped and broken or even stolen. As a result, a landline may be a better choice for telephone service.

Ask the care center about local agencies available to provide help for your Grandfather.

The facility may have a Social Worker on staff for questions about help getting the care center's monthly fees paid. Make sure if you get an unwelcome answer like, "they will just take the individual's Social Security check to pay for your Grandfathers' care" that you find another social worker who has more information.

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I received negative and scary sounding information on the financial costs from facility staff and one social worker. I was told they would take Grandpa's Social Security money, which would leave Grandma with nothing to cover living expenses.

I then met another social worker who told me to contact Medi-Cal and explain the situation so Grandpa could get 100% coverage, while Grandma could still have Grandpa's Social Security check to live on. I ended up having to drive to Grandma's house and have her call and ask the case worker to speak to me so I could explain their financial situation and we were able to get Medi-Cal to provide 100% coverage of the long term care center fees.

Hospice is an agency that provides care at end of life stage.

Some Hospice agencies are non-profit and others charge fees. Be sure to check ahead of time. You can look up hospice services in your city by going to <http://hospicefoundation.org/> and selecting the directory option on the main menu.

Depending on the situation Hospice offers services for the individual to spend their last days at home. But if Grandpa needs 24 hour care, going home may not be an option. Hospice can do some care services at the extended care center. Some of the fee-charging hospice organizations have onsite care available, and depending on the financial situation, that may work well for your Grandfather.