

STEPHEN MINISTRY CONTINUING ED
TELECARE – FEBRUARY 10, 2012

While doing an informal survey of friends – both SM's and people who are not SM's - I learned that telecare is frequently a VERY effective way of caring for someone. It doesn't matter whether you're an active Stephen Minister with a Care Receiver – or just a caring person, because we live in GV where there are many needs, we all give care over the phone frequently.

I think you would agree that the best communication is always face to face – that's because you can see the other person's body language, you can give them a pat or a hug, you can see their surroundings – if their home is messy, or if they appear somewhat disheveled it could indicate they are depressed or just too sick or tired to get things done, you can see if they have lost weight along with other clues that are visible that you totally miss when you are on the phone.

But – face to face visits are not always possible – illness and travel and host of other things can interfere with a face to face visit.

When a snowbird SM is assigned to a CR, some CR's will accept a summer replacement SM, others don't want to switch and prefer to communicate long distance.

For snowbirds who are gone for several months at a stretch, it is particularly important that you stay in touch with your CR on a regular basis, and that you send reports back to either your Peer Group leader or the SL who assigned you in the first place. If something comes up that requires a personal visit, then that can be arranged.

The bottom line issue for phone or any communication tool is how it impacts the EFFECTIVENESS, PRIVACY and CONFIDENTIALITY of the care giving relationship.

Let's first deal with the effectiveness of a call and how you can make a meaningful caregiving call as opposed to a chit chat sort of experience.

First of all, any phone call is only going to get off to good start if both you and your CR/friend are awake, alert and alone.

Relative to the timing of a phone call to someone who is ill or in a crisis, ask, 'Is this a good time to call?' or "Am I interrupting anything?" This gives the person at the other end of the line the opportunity to tell you if someone else is present or if they prefer you phone back later. You may be nervous about phoning and just start babbling, but by asking the question first, it gives you a chance to catch your breath.

If you start talking without asking that question, it could be very uncomfortable for a CR who may not be assertive enough to say, 'I've got company, or I'm about to walk out the door or I'm in the middle of my favorite TV show.'" At that point, your whole conversation is not going to amount to much.

A couple of other common sense reminders: Don't call at meal time – and quite frankly, I'm always careful not to call at what might be rest time in the early afternoon. Bob's nap time is sacred to him! Same thing applies to evening phone calls. People tend to go to bed early around here! **Bob's story about Larry.**

Hint: if you and your CR have email or the ability to text, you can, in a nonintrusive and brief message, set up a day and time to phone that works for both of you.

The biggest drawback about a phone conversation is that you cannot see your CR and so you don't have the benefit of seeing their body language. That means that you need to give him/her your undivided attention and listen for cues that might tell you about emotions or concerns that are upsetting. In this day and age of multi tasking, you may have a computer game of solitaire or bridge in front of you while on the phone. Please resist the urge to play games while on the phone! I confess to being guilty of this while talking to some very chatty relatives of ours. It's just plain rude and I am working on breaking that habit!

Your intention is to support and encourage and above all to LISTEN to your CR. Stephen Ministry founder, Ken Haugk, says that listening is the closest thing to a magic bullet in your little kit of caring skills. A long conversation isn't the goal, it's the quality of the conversation that's important. If you are listening closely, you WILL notice much from the tone of voice, the speed with which they speak, their breath patterns, breaks in their speech – all giving clues as to what emotions are present. When you hear something that denotes emotion, check it out with a question such as, “What are you feeling right now?”

While listening to a CR, I have found that one of the best things to keep me focused is to take notes on what they are saying. Not only do I listen better, but I can later review the notes I've taken to jog my memory and to perhaps give me ideas for a future visit or conversation.

Back to the idea of listening, I want to say a few things about being patient while on the phone – rather than jumping in with a comment or question whenever there is a lull in the conversation. Remember last week when Debra Anderson from the Alzheimer's association spoke with us and told us about the 10 second rule. When you ask a question, wait 10 seconds! It seems like an eternity on the phone.

- Dealing with silence and tears. If your CR has been sharing deep and upsetting feelings, and might be crying or thinking about what to say next, just be there at the other end of the line. Try not to interrupt a productive silence. After a time, just let your CR know that you are still there and paying attention. “I've noticed that you've become very quiet. It must be difficult to talk about what you're feeling and that's ok. I'm still here and I'm listening. Whenever you're ready to continue I'll be here.”
- Stay on track with the conversation – If your CR starts to talk about a concern, but then veers off the subject, say something like, “a moment ago you were sharing some important thoughts and feelings. What did you mean when you said...?”

Some SM's have sent devotional thoughts or care notes to their CR and then discuss them when they are on the phone together. Or, you could have a pertinent verse or a thought or a poem ready to share with your CR - something to get your CR talking.

We all know that John Dunham prays with people on the phone. I'm not sure how he learned to do that, but it seems right for him...

One SM suggested that smiling while talking on the phone makes you sound happy to be speaking with your CR. I've tried it, and it works!

If your CR phones you between visits, here are a few tips:

- Assertively find out what prompted the call – without using the word “why” – why has a tendency to put a person on the defense, it sounds a bit accusing.
- Instead say something like, “It’s great to talk to you. I’m curious if there is anything in particular that led you to call me?”
- Let your time limitations be known – “I have about 10 minutes before I have to leave for an appointment. Can we schedule a time to talk later today?”
- Assertively end the call when the CR’s needs have been met. “It seems as if we’ve covered what you wanted to talk about. What do you think?”
- DO listen for verbal cues that indicate your CR is getting tired or ready to wrap up the conversation. You can ask, “Is there anything else you’d like to talk about before we hang up?”

Now I would like to move on to the topics of Confidentiality and Privacy:

- You want to insure that both of you are alone and able to speak without others overhearing your conversation. A few months ago I was at the Honda dealer in the waiting room and over heard a social worker talking on her cell phone with client after client setting up appointments and asking personal questions of people at the other end of the line. It was annoying and uncomfortable to say the least. I was tempted to give her a lecture on confidentiality. I’m sure you’ve heard conversations you didn’t want to be privy to while waiting in airports or doctors offices. Some of the worst places to over hear calls are restaurants and hospital waiting rooms.
- Normally, if your CR has a husband or wife or family member living with them, that family member is aware of the SM. If that is not the case, then you need to use common sense about identifying yourself as someone from church, or as a friend, but certainly not as a SM. You would want to be sure your CR is alone before you begin your conversation.
- When leaving a voicemail message, you wouldn’t identify yourself as a SM, neither would you leave a terse message...”this is Bill, Call me back.” Do leave your name, and a caring but brief message. “I’m thinking about you and if you have a chance to call me...or I’ll call you back at such and such a time.”

Everything I’ve said up to this point applies to cell phones. Some people don’t even have land lines anymore, and I believe that number will increase as the baby boomers age.

As for electronic communications...

Email communication – pros and cons

- Privacy/confidentiality issues can be greater (shared addresses)
- Must use care with words because emails can be printed and saved
- Timing, interruptions and distractions are not problems
- CR may find it easier to write about a difficult topic than to speak about it.

Some SM's send snail mail notes and cards to their CR and those are greatly appreciated.

Texting is another way to communicate – short sentences, words of encouragement, just letting your CR know you're thinking and praying for him or her. It is a great way to communicate briefly without being intrusive.

And then there's Skype...or Facetime...has possibilities.

As for social media like facebook, twitter, linked in, my opinion is to avoid communicating with your CR that way. It is way too public!

FINAL THOUGHT: Regardless of what you do, it's important to discuss all these communication options with your CR/Friend and how he/she would prefer to handle it.

Face to face visits are always preferable and more meaningful to both the SM and CR, but when you can't get together, I would encourage you to use telecare of one sort or another to keep the relationship active. Just remember that it's the listening that really makes the difference between OK telecare and great telecare!

You might want to share some of your experiences or questions about telecare in your peer group session today.