

QUALITY OF LIFE IS ACHIEVABLE IN LONG-TERM CARE

By Kathy Bradley

What gives your life “quality”? Ask ten people, get fifty different answers. Quality of Life can only be measured by the person living that life, even when receiving long-term care. Verbal and nonverbal communication is essential to discovering what defines “quality” to that person: what they say; how they respond to people and events; what draws their attention; what makes them smile, frown, back away. Caution: a once-preferred activity may not still be desirable. Loss of capacity may change feelings about the activity. Meet them where they are, not where they used to be or where you wish they were, when determining what defines “quality” today.

Autonomy over daily activities is something many of us take for granted—choosing when to wake up, what to wear, what to eat, or when to bathe. Yet, these seemingly trivial decisions can significantly impact quality of life. Whether someone is independent or requires assistance, understanding their habits and supporting their choices can enhance their daily life. Long-term care should empower individuals to maintain their daily routines including weekends, not disrupt or forego them for the convenience of caregivers.

Quality of life hinges on meaningful activities, social interactions, and a structured daily routine. This holds true even when caregiving is involved. Care plans should be individualized, incorporating the person's choices, routines, preferences, and values. The care team should consider factors like the person's preferred wake-up time, bath schedule, and social interactions with friends when creating the care plan.

A well-crafted care plan goes beyond a mere checklist of tasks. It should reflect the complete individual, highlighting where assistance is needed to achieve their priorities, goals, and preferences. Advocates play a crucial role in ensuring that care plans are comprehensive and aligned with the person's desires for a meaningful daily life.

To evaluate the effectiveness of a care plan, it's essential to ask questions like, "Does this activity align with the person's preferences and routine?" "Is this activity meaningful to the person receiving care?" "Does this therapy contribute to the individual's overall well-being?" Caregivers and advocates should continuously assess and adjust the plan to meet these criteria.

Discomfort and dissatisfaction are part of everyone's life, and will occur in long-term care situations. When a person expresses discontent, it's crucial to explore the underlying reasons and seek solutions rather than resorting to the "right to refuse treatment." Creative strategies, such as breaking treatments into smaller steps, offering positive reinforcement, or providing distractions, can help individuals tolerate necessary treatments. If resistance persists, patience and persistence should be the approach, avoiding confrontation while continuing to explore alternatives.

Quality of life in long-term care is a deeply personal matter. It requires effective communication, individualized care plans, and a commitment to preserving a person's autonomy and preferences. Advocates play a vital role in ensuring that individuals receive the care that aligns with their definition of "quality," allowing them to lead fulfilling lives despite the challenges they may face.