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## How can I talk with an older person?

Hello. Laurence again with some thoughts about a conversation with an older person.

I'll take a couple of different approaches in this video – the first will be with a person I am visiting for the first time, and the second a visit with a person I have known for some time. These are actual visits but I have changed some of the circumstances so that the people concerned cannot be recognised. The other limiting feature is that they are conversations carried out in an aged care home therefore there are some protocols that are different from approaching a person in their own home.

**An initial visit or conversation** – Knock on the door – pause, wait a moment to enter: “Hello, Mary, my name is Laurence and I’m a pastoral visitor. I’ve just come to see you today.” (Mary may respond with hello – maybe there is a little ‘small talk here – but not for too long.) “I’m just wondering how you are feeling this morning?” (afternoon). This does a number of things: 1) it acts as an introduction; 2) it shows that you know the person’s name – and you have introduced yourself; 3) It shows that you care about how they feel. Note here that I haven’t asked Mary how she is, rather, how she feels. Mary can respond in any number of ways - she may welcome you with a smile to match the one you are sharing with her! She may respond with little enthusiasm as if she really doesn’t want to talk with you; she may respond quite lucidly and appreciate your visit. Often this is the usual response. In general circumstances she may respond “I’m feeling OK but I had a bad night last night.” “I’m sorry to hear that, would you like to tell me why?” In doing this, you have gone straight to her feelings and provided an opportunity for her to talk to you about something which is causing her some stress.

Sometimes, Mary might respond cautiously, after all she doesn’t know you and may not want to talk too much. In this circumstance you might refer to something in her room to help her feel more at home with you. For example, she may have a lot of photos of her family around the walls, on her table etc. If this seems to you to be quite dominant, you might make the observation that family seems to be important to her and you might explore her family with her – sons and/or daughters/, grandchildren. She may well want to take the opportunity to confide in you. This is not unusual. It soon becomes evident to you that her family is central to her life – her spirituality. From there on (as you have already started to do) you use the LACE model and the Connect-Explore model (page 19 in the Handbook), to explore each of the things she says. The point is you have provided her with the opportunity to talk for herself about what matters to her.

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**Now for the second example – John.** John is a long-time friend. I have been visiting him for some weeks now. So I reach his room and again knock on the door - courtesy whether it is a new person or an older friend. “Hello, John, it’s Laurence how are you feeling today?” I can ask this directly because I know that the last time I saw him he wasn’t feeling too smart. “I’m feel much better now, thanks.” “Has the Dr come to see you?” I can be direct because I am aware that he had been waiting for the Dr to come for quite some days. He can respond, “Yes, he came, and he was able attend to my leg” etc. Now, at this stage, I may wish to take another direction. Sometimes, older people do not want to necessarily talk for ever about their illness and prefer to talk about something different. I know John and I know he likes reading his Bible. I have seen previously that he has had his Bible on his table, and I have been able to explore with him some of his favourite passages. “Have you been reading any special chapters this week?” This provides the opportunity for him to talk about his reading – what matters to him and as I have learned, what is central to his life – his spirituality. (I have known John for a fair time and I know that he likes to share prayer so I always leave him with a short prayer. I always ask if he would like me to share a prayer with him. It’s important to give him the ‘power’ to decide for himself.) And, of course, maybe Lionel next door is an avid reader and likes Clive Cussler books so if you were visiting him you could ask him to talk about his current reading.

**Can you see the advantage in the LACE and Connect-Explore models?** You use every opportunity to enable the person you are visiting to talk about what is important to them.

Of course, not every conversation is as easy as these. Some people will be very hard to engage. This could be for any of a number of reasons. Maybe they are just quiet, maybe they are not particularly social, maybe they are not just feeling up to talking today. We can still use the LACE model, but responses may be short. In these cases, we have to use our judgement as to when to stop or if to continue. Remember, the essential thing is that it is the person we are visiting who determines by their responses whether we stop or continue. **In some instances, it may be important for us just to be there and not talk.** I well remember a case where I was with a lady who was in palliative care mode. I was asked to visit her. I had known her for some months but I was just informed of her change in diagnosis. She was a deeply spiritual person but in her last hours of life she was drifting in and out of sleep. Someone had the forethought to have a nature/ Biblical video on her TV screen at the foot of her bed. It consisted of natural, beautiful scenery with a verse displayed over the scenes occasionally. Often, as she came out of her sleep there would be a verse on the screen and I would read it to her.

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This meant so much to her. Much of the time was spent in silence but when she was awake, her time was meaningful to her. My being there meant a lot to her. When it was time for me to leave, she held out her hand smiled and said, “Thank you.” It wasn’t that I had made an impact, I was there with her and for her and she appreciated that. Looking back at this interaction, I feel very privileged that I was able to be with her in the last few hours of her life. She was deeply spiritual (she was in her 90’s), did not want to share prayer as she was committed to her own church members in this way, but she obviously appreciated focused Christian ‘meditation’ at the end of her life. Apart from being able to care for her, it was very much a sharing for me. I gained strength from witnessing her focused spirituality.

In summary – we can use the LACE model as a central foundation for our conversations with older people. It encourages the person we visit to talk about the things that matter to them – what is central to their life. We are simply there to help them take the conversation they want to have in their own direction.

May God be with you in your conversations with older people.

Laurence Lephert

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