

Sexual Expression among Long-Term Care Residents

Sexuality among the aging, particularly in the context of long-term care, has traditionally been overlooked; however, it is gradually gaining recognition as an important factor in the lives of older adults and a natural part of the aging process. Preserving residents' rights to freedom of sexual expression in the long-term care environment is an important component of resident-centered care and residents' rights.

Residents face multiple barriers to exercising their rights to sexual expression in long-term care facilities. Shared living spaces, lack of privacy measures, and inadequate opportunities for private interaction prevent many residents from acting on their sexual interests. Additionally, staff attitudes or uncertainty in how to respond to various forms of sexual expression can lead to discomfort or embarrassment for all parties. Staff training and clear strategies for addressing sexual expression become necessary to establish consistent and ethical professional response policies.

It is becoming increasingly important that facilities anticipate residents will require health services and resources for managing sexual functioning. It is also necessary to understand the physiological aspects of sex and the aging body, as well as the effects of disease and medication on sexual competency. Care plans for maintaining and regaining sexual competency may be considered, as well as effective methods for educating residents on sexually-transmitted infections and tools for protecting themselves from risky sexual behavior.

The definition of acceptable sexual expression requires reconsideration when applied to residents with cognitive impairment. Collective efforts must be made among residents' care teams to determine whether residents understand the nature and effect of their actions.

Facilities must contemplate the extent to which they are willing to accommodate residents' sexual expression. Ultimately, attitudes of awareness, acceptance, and respect of sexual diversity and the conditions and influences surrounding residents' sexual needs and desires must be clearly communicated to the residents themselves.

For more information on the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program or to reach a Local Long-Term Care Ombudsman, please call 866-236-1430.

The mission of the Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman is to protect the health, safety, welfare, and rights of individuals residing in long-term care by investigating complaints, seeking resolutions to problems, and providing advocacy with the goal of enhancing quality of life and care.