

# Q&A

**TRISH CARROLL, a leading advisor on counselling services for older adults and their families, answers our questions on appropriate care for Forgotten Australians/Care Leavers in residential aged care.**



## **What are the unique needs for Care Leavers/Forgotten Australians when entering aged care?**

The terms Forgotten Australians and Care Leavers refer to the half a million Australians who experienced out-of-home care as children, such as foster care, residential care (children's homes) or places outside their family. Many of these children experienced abuse, neglect, trauma, loss of identity and culture and limited education, which had lifelong impacts on their relationships, choices, health and wellbeing.

The prospect for Care Leavers of transition to residential aged care can trigger traumatic childhood memories and create significant fear and anxiety about spending later life in institutional care.

Of particular concern is a fear and mistrust of authority, as many Care Leavers were harmed as children by people in positions of authority. In an aged care setting, any staff member can be perceived as a person in authority, especially where a resident depends on personal care.

Another concern is privacy. The transition to a confined space in residential care can trigger childhood memories of life in institutional care, especially dormitories, where privacy was not an option.

Enforced routines in aged care can present another potential trigger for distress. Care Leavers often spent their childhood following strict schedules for getting up, meals, washing and lights-out, with punishment for non-compliance.

Loss of identity or culture is also a potential issue, as some Care Leavers spent their childhood being referred to by a number, or a name that was not their preferred name. The prospect of this recurring in an aged care setting can be a real source of anxiety.

Food can be a very strong trigger for childhood memories. Some Care Leavers recall being forced to eat food they did not enjoy – many dislike porridge or food with white sauce. Some Care Leavers may fear dining in a communal environment – a valid reason for wanting to eat in the privacy of their room.

## **How can facility managers and care staff best respond to these needs?**

You may never know if a resident is a Care Leaver (or whatever term each individual uses). It is a deeply private experience, which residents and/or their family will choose whether to speak about. If you know a resident is a Care Leaver please remember that everyone has their own unique story and care needs. You can meet those needs and build trust in many ways.

First, create a culture of care imbued with respect, professionalism, choice, autonomy and compassion. Conversations and kindness can occur as a part of everyday activities – assisting residents with their personal care needs or meals or helping them choose something to wear.

Listen empathically, and without opinion or judgment, to whatever the resident shares with you.

Language is very important in building trust with Care Leavers – avoid critical language (e.g. don't do that!) which can trigger painful memories of past trauma. Use the preferred name of the resident and avoid saying "darling" or speaking to residents as if they are children; this can trigger painful memories.

Be attentive also to non-verbal communication. Genuine kindness and respect can be communicated (or not) by eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, language tone of voice and stance.

Ensure choice and flexibility in all service delivery, including care and meal time routines.

Seek permission when entering a resident's room and ask how they prefer to manage their own privacy.

Ask permission to provide personal care, being sensitive to personal space and fear of touch. Ensure that you position yourself at the same or lower level than the resident – for example, sitting if they're in a wheelchair.

And, when a Care Leaver behaves in a way you don't expect, reflect on some key questions: What has been the trigger/cause? Have you done or said anything to prompt this? What reminiscence might be occurring? How will you describe the behaviour in the case notes to avoid creating a negative impression about the resident? Does this resident require additional support?

## **Are there any initiatives that support Forgotten Australians/Care Leavers in aged care?**

Everyone working in aged care – including care and facility managers, CEOs and board members – is responsible for reassuring Care Leavers that they are not forgotten. Suggested initiatives include:

- Transition to Care processes, where residents and family are invited to share information about their life before or immediately after admission to enable care planning and resident support. (Please note: Care Leavers are more likely to share deeply personal information in conversation with skilled aged care staff – it's not something they will include in a 'Key to Me' form.)
- Ongoing professional development for employees to improve understanding of the unique needs of Care Leavers.
- Resident meetings and feedback sessions are a helpful way to involve residents, ensure they feel heard and instil a sense of empowerment.

## **What resources are available to support staff?**

If this Care Leavers information has raised issues for you, contact your Employee Assistance Provider, Care Leavers Australian Network ([clan.org.au](http://clan.org.au)) or seek other support.

Also, the *Caring for Forgotten Australians Information Package* published by the Australian Government is available at: <https://agedcare.health.gov.au/support-services/people-from-diverse-backgrounds/care-leavers-resources>. ■

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