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### What? Sex in a Nursing Home???

“You mean people can have sex in a nursing home? You’ve got to be kidding!” Unfortunately, reactions like this are all too typical. For some reason, people are shocked to think that older Americans still have sexual needs and that sex isn’t just for the young.

Along with this misconception comes the belief that seeking sexual fulfillment while living in a long term care facility is somehow immoral or even illegal. The right to sexual expression does not change simply because an individual lives in a nursing home or assisted living facility. Oftentimes, sexual expression is labeled as an abnormal behavior, when it really is the basic need for a human touch, love, intimacy and closeness.

Individuals might be deemed legally incompetent and lose their decision-making rights, but they don’t lose that innate desire to express themselves sexually. The decision-making capacity is not an all or nothing situation. An individual might not have the capacity to render a decision about having major surgery, but she can still make a decision about what flavor ice cream she may want. Respected author James P. Richardson, who wrote a widely-quoted article on sexuality in the nursing home patient, reported the “ability to consent to sexual activity could be considered to lie closer to the decision about ice cream than to the decision about major surgery.” Long term care facilities should consider developing policies addressing issues of consent related to sexual behavior and relationships. Residents who wish to appropriately express their sexuality should be provided with the opportunity to do so. Residents and families who are concerned about these issues should consult and work with the facility’s staff.

The Hebrew Home for the Aged in Riverdale, New York created a sexuality workgroup composed of facility staff, researchers, residents’ family members, and religious representatives to establish policies and procedures related to sexual expression and residents’ rights. The resulting policy states clearly that residents have the right to seek sexual expression in an appropriate manner, provided that all activity is consensual and does not negatively affect the resident community.

The Long Term Care Ombudsman Program of the Board on Aging and Long Term Care concurs with this philosophy and is willing to assist residents, families, and facilities to develop policies and procedures to protect the right of all residents to express the full range of their humanness in a safe and appropriate way that respects the rights of others residing or working in the facility.

To arrange a consultation, please contact the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program at (800) 815.0015

*By: Vickie Bergquist, Regional Ombudsman*