

**Helpful Tips for Your First Senior Companion Visit** Taken from “How to Start a Conversation and Make Friends” by Don Gabo

One of our most important conversational skills doesn’t come from our tongue, but from our body. Research has shown that over half of face-to-face conversation is nonverbal. “Body language”, as it is called, often communicates our feelings and attitudes before we speak, and it projects our level of receptivity to others.

Most poor conversationalists don’t realize that their non-receptive body language (crossed arms, little eye contact, and no smiling) is often the cause of short and unsustain conversations. We are judged quickly by the first signals we give off, and if the first impressions are not open and friendly, it’s going to be difficult to maintain a good conversation. Use your body language to break down the natural barriers that separate strangers. The following “softening” techniques can make your first impressions work FOR you, not against you.

**S-O-F-T-E-N** represents a specific, nonverbal technique for encouraging others to talk with you.

**S =** Smile **O =** Open Arms **F =** Forward Lean **T =** Touch **E =** Eye Contact **N =** Nod

**S=Smiling:** A pleasant smile is a strong indication of a friendly and open attitude and willingness to communicate. Smiling does not mean that you have to put on a phony face or pretend that you are happy all of the time. By smiling, you are demonstrating an open attitude to conversation. A smile indicates general approval toward the other person, and this will usually make the other person feel more open to talk to you.

**O=Open Arms:** Open arms suggests that you are friendly and available for contact. During a conversation, open arms makes others feel that you are receptive and listening. On the other hand, standing or sitting with your arms crossed makes you appear closed to contact, defensive, and closed-minded.

**F=Forward Lean:** Leaning forward slightly while a person is talking to you indicates interest on your part, and shows you are listening to what the person is saying. This is usually taken as a compliment by the other person, and will encourage him to continue talking. By doing this, you are saying: “I hear what you’re saying, and I’m interested – keep talking!” This usually lets the other person feel that what he is saying is interesting, and encourages the person to keep talking. Leaning back gives off signals of disinterest and even boredom. Take care not to violate someone’s “personal space” by getting too close, too soon.

**T=Touch:** In our culture, the most acceptable form of first contact between two people who are just meeting is a warm handshake. A warm and firm handshake is a safe way of showing an open and friendly attitude toward the people you meet. Be the first to extend your hand in greeting. Couple this with a friendly “Hi”, a nice smile, and your name, and you have made the first step to open the channels of communication between you and the other person. It is also important to end your conversations with a warm and friendly handshake. Couple it with a bright smile and a friendly statement like, “I’ve really enjoyed talking with you!” This is an excellent way to end a conversation and leaves you and the other person both feeling good about the exchange.

**E= Eye Contact:** Perhaps the strongest of the nonverbal gestures are sent through the eyes. Direct eye contact indicates that you are listening to the other person, and that you want to know about them. Eye contact should be natural and not forced or overdone. It is perfectly okay to have brief periods of eye contact while you observe other parts of the person’s face. When the person smiles, be sure to smile back. But always make an effort to return your gaze to the person’s eyes as they speak. It’s acceptable not to have eye contact all the time. Too much eye contact can be counterproductive and appear aggressive. Avoiding eye contact can make both parties feel anxious and uncomfortable, and give the impression that you are uninterested, dishonest, or bored with the conversation and the company. A blank stare suggest your thoughts are elsewhere. So be sure to look into the eyes of the people you talk with, and send this message: “I hear what you’re saying – go on!”

**N= Nod:** A nod of the head indicates that you are listening and that you understand what is being said. It usually signals approval and encourages the other person to continue talking. A nod doesn’t necessarily mean agreement.