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## Senior dementia residents soothed by baby dolls at Poet's Walk Henderson



By Phillip Moyer

When memory care seniors cuddle a baby doll, it brings them a sense of love that fills their hearts and lifts their spirits. Cuddle Therapy, which is simply cuddling or caring for a baby doll, is designed to effectively and safely ease distress for Alzheimer's and dementia patients, as well as to alleviate any daily anxiety that a senior may face. It allows these seniors to connect to a time in their lives that was very meaningful—parenthood. Cuddle Therapy is a component of Poet's Walk Henderson's Signature Touches, a program created to enhance the well-being of the residents through meaningful, supportive therapies dedicated to holistic wellness.

[www.PoetsWalk-SpringHills.com](http://www.PoetsWalk-SpringHills.com)



"My mother comes life when she cuddles these baby dolls," says April Hannewald. Her mother, Barbara Garland (pictured above), has been a resident at Poet's Walk for one year. "My mother is not very verbal any more but when I'm pushing her around Poet's Walk in her wheelchair, she immediately starts talking in full sentences when we pass the baby dolls. 'Oh look! What are the babies doing?' she says when we pass them," continues Hannewald. "When I sit with my mom and she becomes fidgety and distracted, all I have to do is give her a baby doll and it puts a smile on her face. She talks to the baby and kisses its forehead often. Of all of the many activities Poet's Walk offers to their memory care residents, cuddle therapy is as good as it gets when simulating a real life activity."

During Cuddle Therapy, a life-like doll is given to the resident to "care for" as part of their daily activities. In caring for the doll—by holding, rocking back and forth, and cuddling with—seniors can gain a deeper sense of purpose, helping to reduce depression and anxiety while encouraging a sense of love and self-worth. The dolls help seniors with Alzheimer's and dementia connect back into the world and express love. For those residents who are parents, it can bring back the happy memories of raising a family. Dementia patients still feel the past and often talk about things that happened long ago but are still full of emotion.

Poet's Walk Henderson team members also see a difference in their residents during Cuddle Therapy activities. "I love seeing their joy and how much they truly come to life with the love they have for the babies. They also can suddenly become less agitated when they are taking care of a baby," said Phil Robb, Director of Resident Engagement at Poet's Walk Henderson. Mark Shaffer, Executive Director at Poet's Walk Henderson, continues, "Among the various forms of recreation therapy that our caregivers provide, we have found cuddle therapy is one of the simplest and most therapeutic. It is also one of the most successful as it gives our residents a sense of purpose that they long for."

Studies show that when used for dementia patients, Cuddle Therapy increases positive behaviors and reduces negative ones. The benefits are designed to trigger empathy and a sense of contentment. Through cuddle therapy, caregivers and family members have seen improvements in:



- Stress Relief: Holding and rocking a doll has shown to help calm residents, providing them a sense of serenity.
- Wandering: A common symptom of dementia, instances of wandering have shown to decrease when residents take an interest in caring for and focusing on a doll.
- Medication Distribution: Serving as an alternative form of stress and anxiety relief, many caregivers have found that patients who take advantage of cuddle therapy are less dependent on anxiety medications.
- Self-Esteem: Because seniors gain a sense of purpose when taking care of their doll, many will experience a boost in confidence.

It's important to remember these few tips:

- Refer to the doll as a baby and treat it like a real child vs a doll.
- The doll should be life-like but shouldn't cry as that can be upsetting.
- Give the senior the time they need to get to know the doll. It may not be an instant attraction but can grow over time.
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Even as someone's memory may fade, it is still possible for them to enjoy a sense of love, peace, and meaning. For those living with dementia, expressing love to a baby doll illustrates that they still feel love for those that they love and loved.