

THE BENEFITS OF AQUARIUMS IN LONG-TERM CARE FACILITIES

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The colors, motion and sounds associated with an aquarium can serve as a form of therapy to relax residents of the long-term care facility.

The aquarium is a piece of living furniture that provides a window into the watery world of aquatic creatures. Aquariums can bring a wonderful aesthetic to the décor of a nursing home, helping to replicate the more soothing, less sterile environment that the resident formerly experienced in a home setting. It can also help induce conversation between residents and between residents and staff, stimulating the mind and curiosity of the viewer. In a study conducted on the impact of aquariums in an elderly care facility, DeSchraver and Riddick (1990) noted *“that each viewer of the live tank took particular interest in one or two fish and was often overheard conversing with others between sessions about these favorite fish. It became apparent to the investigators that the live fish acted as a social lubricant. In addition, individuals who were initially reticent to interact with the investigators became more animated, personable, and revealing when they learned that they had been selected to view a live fish aquarium. Indeed, the presence of an aquarium in a health professional's practice setting may serve as a catalyst for establishing a dialogue and an alliance with elderly clientele.”*

Another compelling reason to include an aquarium in the décor of a nursing home is that they can provide real health benefits for the elderly. The colors, motion and sounds can serve as a form of therapy to relax the resident. Studies have shown that viewing an aquarium can reduce stress and lower diastolic blood pressure in the elderly (Beck and Katcher, 1981; Riddick 1985). Aquarium observers, in elderly care facilities, also experience a decrease in pulse rate and muscle tension and an increase in skin temperature (DeSchriver and Riddick 1990).



Freshwater or saltwater set-ups, like this reef aquarium, can stimulate interaction between elderly residents and employees.

Researchers at Purdue University have shown that seniors suffering from Alzheimer's disease consumed more food, had an increase in body weight and required fewer nutritional supplements when an aquarium was placed in a care facilities' dining room (Edwards and Beck 2002). The presence of the aquariums also curtailed disruptive behaviors. The researchers in this study noted *"A tank of colorful, gliding fish... often held patients' attention for up to 30 minutes -- a relatively long time for many Alzheimer's patients."* Dr. Nancy Edwards, one of researchers involved in the study, reported that, *"Often long-term care environments do not offer a lot of stimulation, but fish move around in various patterns, so there's enough variability to keep patients' interest.... Placing fish tanks in nursing homes may help cut health-care costs by reducing the need for nutritional supplements and for medications given to help calm disruptive patients."*

The data are clear: a fish aquarium is a relatively inexpensive intervention to improve the physiological and social-psychological health of some in the nursing home community.

References:

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