

REFLECTIVE PIECE

Care through catering: Finding the huggerholics

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Care through catering: Finding the huggerholics

This reflection is dedicated to anyone new to the role, still finding their feet, or considering work in aged care sector. Whether you're a personal care worker, catering assistant, lifestyle assistant, or support staff, working in aged care is an incredibly rewarding experience.

At one facility where I work, I once noticed a poster on the wall that read: "Spread the love, not the flu." It perfectly sums up what this job means to me. Every shift, I feel like I'm giving and receiving love—it flows both ways. As a PhD candidate who spends long hours buried in academic papers, I often come to aged care not just to earn, but to emotionally recharge. I jokingly call it my "stress relief shift"—a chance to reconnect with life's simple joys through the people I serve, whom I affectionately call "my loves."

Of course, it wasn't easy at first. Like many new staff, I struggled in the beginning. I didn't yet understand the residents well, nor fully grasp all the protocols. It was overwhelming. But once I got through that early phase—as anyone does when entering a new profession—I began to experience the "sweet rewards." The small stories I'll share below are about those moments of connection that keep me going.

There's one resident I now call "Mom"—she's around my own mother's age, and recently she started calling me her "daughter." She's warm, cheerful, and incredibly affectionate. Every time I bring her morning tea, we exchange at least five or ten high-fives in a row. After I returned from a few weeks of leave, she was the first to greet me. "Where have you been?, I missed you so much." In that moment, I realised something important: we're not just giving love to residents—they're giving love right back. That's a gift beyond measure.

There's another resident who, at first, intimidated me. His gaze was sharp, his expression serious. During my early shifts, he scolded me a few times—once for making his tea too strong, another time for spreading too much Vegemite on his toast. Each time, I apologised, thanked him for the feedback, and promised to do better. I think my willingness to listen left an impression, because slowly, he began to change. These days, when I enter the room for morning tea, he greets me with a warm smile.

One morning, I accidentally made the same Vegemite mistake again. A carer came to the kitchen asking for a new slice, and I offered to bring it myself. As I handed it over, I said, "Sorry, I went a little heavy on the Vegemite today." He smiled gently and replied, "It's okay—I just can't handle the strong smell, that's all." His tone was soft and kind, so different from before. That's when I realised: once a resident feels respected and cared for, they become more forgiving. Love changes everything.

From my observations, many older adults crave warmth and affection. While some residents prefer quiet interaction and respectful distance, many welcome gentle physical connection. I call these residents the "huggerholics." It's hard to explain, but when you hold a resident's hand, offer a soft hug, or place a comforting hand on their shoulder, the emotional connection is unmistakable—you see it in their eyes, their tears, or their bright laughter.

One day, I was serving tea to a lovely elderly lady. I held her hand and wished her a beautiful day and a delicious cup of tea. She smiled and held my hand tightly. I could feel a warm energy passing through her grip. On impulse, I asked, "Can I give you a hug?" She laughed and said, "More than welcome." I hugged her gently and whispered, "You're the best grandma ever." She burst into joyful laughter and replied, "I'm a huggerholic!" From then on, every morning tea included a hug. And every time I left her room, half my stress seemed to melt away.

Eventually, I realised it wasn't just her who needed the hug—I needed it too.

So I developed my own quiet strategy: to find the huggerholics at every aged care facility I work at. Not in a pushy way, but through careful steps:

- *begin with gentle, respectful conversation;*
- *use kind eye contact and observe facial expressions;*
- *if they respond warmly, try a soft hand touch;*
- *if they squeeze back or smile, you've received a "yes";*
- *when the moment feels right, offer a gentle hug with a soft pat on the back and a kind word; and*
- *when you receive that hug, pause to appreciate it. It's not just about touch—it's about human connection.*

In summary, working in aged care gives you the opportunity to love and be loved in return. It is one of the most emotionally fulfilling jobs I've ever known. If your main goal is to earn a high salary, this might not be the right path. But if you're looking for meaning, for joy, for connection—this work is worth every moment,

whether full-time or casual. I've chosen to pursue it during my free time, as a way to balance my life. Before each shift, I like to joke: "Time to go visit my loves."

And that's exactly how it feels.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflicts of interest declared.

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