



# Northern Health Palliative Care

## Difficulty Breathing Information for Personal Support Workers

### Gathering Information

Observe the patient – be alert to behaviors that may indicate the person is experiencing difficulty breathing. Difficulty breathing is a subjective experience and the patient may or may not exhibit the following signs:

#### Shortness of Breath

- Pausing to breathe while speaking.
- Gasping for air when moving.
- Pursing of lips when breathing.
- Use of accessory muscles in neck/chest.

#### Changes In Breathing Patterns, Sounds, Rates

- Congestion or moist, wheezy or raspy breaths.
- Cough.
- Breathing with shallow, quick breaths.

#### Managing Difficulty Breathing On Their Own

- Moving and changing positions frequently.
- Sleeping upright in a recliner.
- Feeling agitated and/or restless.

### Comfort Measures

PSWs can help to manage a patient's difficulty breathing by:

- Investigating triggers for difficulty breathing and avoid if possible (scents, activity).
- Pacing activities – moving slowly between activities.
- Resting/recovery between activities
- Avoid hurrying the patient/resident—allow for as much time to complete tasks as needed.
- Using physical supports for arms to rest on during activity.
- Limit visitors (if necessary) or suggest shorter visits.
- Stopping to rest and pause to breathe between one action and the next in a sequence of actions.
- Using a fan or open a window to provide air flow around the person.
- Coach the person to breathe slowly with you, using a calm, low voice.

#### References:

Murray, K. (2014) Integrating a Palliative Approach: Essentials for Personal Support Workers. N.p.: Life and Death Matters.