



## **Transition Pointers for Family & Friends of Older Adults who are Moving:**

### **Making it through change in meaningful ways**

Change is difficult for anyone, so it's natural that people can have difficulty transitioning to assisted living communities. While there are many benefits of assisted living, there's no getting around the fact that the move involves changes that many people don't always like.

It can be a smoother transition if, from day one, your loved one has accepted the decision to move and participate in the process in some meaningful way. For many older adults, this next chapter of life may be something they are looking forward to: a chance to meet new people and explore new things.

For others, leaving their home and making a move to a senior living community can be very difficult. In this case, the process can be extremely stressful for many families and caregivers. Regardless of your loved one's attitude about making a move, everyone needs time to adjust to new surroundings and new routines.

Psychologist Dr. Deborah L. Stote said in an interview, "Older adults who are moving from their home into assisted living typically encounter varying degrees of adjustment disorder." Seniors will best adjust to their new home with some encouragement and support from family members during the senior's first days and weeks at the assisted living community. The key, Dr. Stote says, is that seniors who are relocating "need positive reassurance that they are moving into a new chapter of their lives, rather than ending the life they have always known."

**Family involvement helps a lot.** Research shows that residents with families nearby do better and receive better care. Even though many assisted living facilities try to provide stimulating activities for residents, having family buffers against isolation. Families can take their loved ones out for fresh air or a change of scenery, as well as talk about familiar people and places in a way that staff or

new acquaintances can't. Many studies show that family contact is one of the strongest predictors of life satisfaction, in all kinds of housing settings.

What's more, families play a strong advocate role: negotiating on behalf of their loved one about the type of assistance that's provided, dealing with staff, and providing more physical and practical support, such as financial management and shopping. Families do a lot more of this for loved ones in assisted living communities compared to families of those in nursing homes. This is especially true when a loved one has dementia.

Getting through the first few months of this transition is the most challenging time, but family, friends, and others can play a vital role in someone's successful transition to assisted living.

### **BEFORE A MOVE**

Take photos of the home before things are moved. Capture everyday moments: how things are arranged on the kitchen counters, decorations in the living room, landscaping around the yard. At some point your loved one will treasure having a photo album of memories of their old home, particularly if it was one they lived in for decades.

Avoid unnecessary stress by packing well in advance of the move. Take the time necessary to help your loved one carefully go through their possessions and decide which items to take, which to give away and which to discard.

Select items to take to the new home: Personal things make the new residence feel like home. Bring items that have personal meaning, including pictures, knick-knacks, medals, etc. Of course, make sure your loved one decides which keepsakes to bring to the new home.

Collect all documents, files, and paperwork from throughout the home in one secure location to ensure they are handled safely.

Visit the community together as often as possible before the move. Attend meals and events to become familiar with the residents, staff, and layout of the community. This will make the community and everyone who lives and works there seem less foreign after they do move.

Make sure that any questions you or your loved one have, including the move-in process and what to expect over the first few days, are answered by the community ahead of time.

Put together a “biography” page about your loved one, so that staff can get to know them quickly. Include things they like/dislike, hobbies, etc. Particularly for people with dementia, this helps staff know their history and see the full person.

If you don't already have one, create a binder or notebook with all your loved one's information: copies of identification, birth and marriage certificates, spouse death certificate, military discharge papers, Medicare and health insurance cards; lists of medical providers and medications; copies of wills, health care directive, and power of attorney documents; list of financial accounts and locations including insurance policies; funeral preferences or pre-arrangements; etc.

*ACCS provides the Life Design Notes binder, which allows you to capture the above documents and information plus family history, education and employment history, personal life stories, details of friendships, social media accounts, and planning goals for maximizing the remaining years.*

### **DURING THE MOVE**

Help them get settled – assist with the unpacking and decorating of the new home. Setting up a new place can involve feelings of excitement, anticipation, nervousness, panic, or grief. Supporting them during the move-in process often helps them feel more comfortable.

Arrange furniture and personal items to re-create settings of the old home in the new space:

- Make the new bedroom feel as close as possible to the old bedroom: reading glasses and bible or book on the nightstand, same photos in the right places.
- Make the entry at the new front door feel similar to the old one: key hook, coat hook, umbrella stand, photos, whatever was near the old front door.
- Make the new bathroom seem like the old one: same towels and shower curtain, same soap dispenser and toothbrush holder.

Enable them to continue an old routine. For example, if your father starts his day every morning with a newspaper in one hand and a cup of hot coffee in the other, don't let him be without them. Make arrangements for daily delivery of the newspaper, have it forwarded to his new address and ensure he has a steady supply of his most comforting beverage.

Ensure your loved one has their own telephone and address book on hand. Then, be sure to call them and encourage friends or family members to do the same.

Share a meal together in the community dining area before you leave.

## **AFTER THE MOVE**

Encourage participation in activities. Even decades from school years, anyone can have the first day jitters, fear of rejection, or a dismissive attitude or view that some things are beneath them (which may be just a cover for the first two, jitters and fears). People are more likely to adjust well to a move if they get involved with activities and make some friends at their new community. With a typically wide variety of activities, while not all of them will necessarily be appealing to each person, there's bound to be something that they'll like. Or they might try something new and find out they actually enjoy it!

Encourage helping out at the community. Many assisted living communities have resident volunteers that take on roles at the community such as answering phones, managing the library or sponsoring a club. (If an activity they really want is missing, they can get it started!) When residents feel useful and as though they have a purpose, it can improve their outlook and help immensely with the transition. Plus it's a way to get to know other staff and residents.

Keep in touch: But don't just tell yourself you will – put this in your schedule or put a reminder in your calendar, and don't allow yourself to get side-tracked. If calling every day is a bit much, have them expect your call at set days and times of the week.

Coordinate between friends and family so you can stagger days or times to call – that way you each don't have as much to do, and your loved one hears from everyone regularly.

### **Allow – and respect – independence:**

Visiting during often during the first days after the move does help make sure they don't feel abandoned, and it helps to monitor the status of the transition. But too much "handholding" could hinder your loved one from successfully adapting to their new home. If all their time during the transition period is spent with family, they will not be making new friends and getting involved in the community like they should. Give them space to adjust to their new home on their own.

Knowing when to step back and let a loved one get on with their new life can be tricky – there's no one sign that will tell you it's time. After the initial move-in period, it will fall on the staff and residents of the new community to step up and help. While it's certainly important for a person's pre-existing friends and family to make an effort to visit, the day-to-day social interaction should be with their

peers, their neighbors. Connecting early on with others in the community is critical for newcomers.

**Visiting and maintaining connection:**

When visits are possible, family and friends can attend activities with their loved ones to ensure that they are meeting new people. Participate together in an activity or event offered in the community.

Visit regularly. Just be there, lounging outdoors and spending time together. You don't have to have an agenda or something to do – just conversation is good.

If it's overwhelming to have the entire family come (depending on the family size), go alone, or take along a friend or former neighbor for a chat.

Stop by and have lunch with your loved one and their new friends. (It's often a surprise, after hearing someone complain that they don't have anything in common with anyone there, to see them enjoying conversation with their tablemates at mealtime!)

Volunteer to lead an art class, show your vacation photos, or host another fun activity that both you and your loved one enjoy.

Maintain ties to familiar surroundings. For example, if dad wants to have his hair cut at his favorite barber shop, or enjoy breakfast at the local diner, try to oblige him whenever possible. Opportunities for reminiscing can not only strengthen your relationship but foster a sense of independence (which may feel as if it is slipping away) and remind him how meaningful life really is. Perhaps one morning, you can even offer to take dad and a few friends out for breakfast at the diner and he can show off his favorite local spots.

When visiting is not possible, family members can keep in contact with both their loved one and the assisted living staff. Make sure that they are socializing and getting involved in the community.

Send flowers or special deliveries every so often. For mom or dad, receiving a special delivery from you every now and again shows your love and support and reminds them that you are thinking about them. A flowery bouquet, a new family photo album, or the new book edition from your mom's favorite author are some meaningful ways of connecting with them when you can't be there.

**Whenever you talk with your loved one:**

Listen to them: give them time to talk about it. Often the initial problem is not the problem. Jumping in too quickly with a solution might cause you to miss a richer, and more needed, conversation.

Ask how they are feeling about things: Older adults often are not as easily able to voice their emotions and may welcome the invitation to discuss their feelings.

End the conversation with a plan: Make sure they know and share your expectations about what the next steps will be. This also makes sure you have an agreement in case of an emergency or if something happens and they can no longer make or communicate their decisions. If you're on the phone, have them write it down.

Thank them for letting you help with this and for talking to you about it. They may have felt embarrassed or reluctant to ask for help.

**Pay attention to your loved one's emotions:**

Anticipate their grief—which will likely occur, regardless of whether or not the move was their idea—and help them cope in any way you can.

Acknowledge their losses. Realize what your loved one has lost by moving out of a home they've lived in, maybe for decades.

- They've needed to significantly downsize, often from a spacious home to a smaller apartment.
- They're having to adjust into a new routine: mealtimes, daily activities, etc.
- They're having to adapt to a new environment: neighbors sharing walls, people constantly around. People often feel resentment about having to live with those who are more disabled or frail than themselves – even if they are actually not so different from each other.
- They may have feelings of abandonment.
- They may feel frustration around a perceived loss of independence.

Of course, many people have no trouble at all adjusting to assisted living and take to it from day one. Often, people that initially find the transition difficult, usually adapt quickly and come to recognize that aspects of assisted living that first bothered them are actually beneficial. For instance, residents find it to be a great relief to downsize and not worry about housekeeping and upkeep.

For people who moved not altogether willingly, their feelings of abandonment and betrayal often turn into feelings of gratitude based on the recognition that their family members were acting out of love when they arranged the move.

People's feelings and emotional states are very likely to change more frequently during a period of transition. Be prepared to meet your loved one where they are today, right now, without expectations based on how they were feeling or acting the last time you saw them or talked with them. You won't have any way of knowing what thoughts or feelings they have been experiencing in the meantime.

Don't bring up past negative states, e.g. "you seemed so sad last time I talked to you." Instead, focus on the positive: "you seem cheerful today, what have you been up to?" It can be hard to recognize the positive without comparing it to the negative – try practicing conversations and transitions in topics: "I'm glad you're having a good day. Is there anything I can bring you next time?"

**Look for signs of problems:**

If your loved one's affect changes dramatically when they transition to assisted living -- from sunny to depressed, or from talkative to withdrawn -- look for possible reasons. Pain and poor care can dampen a strong personality. Even the most well-adjusted person in the world isn't going to do well if they are in pain or if there is a problem with the care being provided.

**IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE PERSON THAT MOVED...**

The caregiver, family, and friends all need to adjust to this change, too.

**Don't feel guilty.** Very often, family members can feel guilty about placing loved ones into assisted living. Remember the move only happened because it was necessary. Moving to a community actually benefits the health and well-being of older adults.

For a long time, society has judged families as "abandoning" an older person into a care facility as being the worst thing we could ever do. Only in the past few years, with the growth in assisted living facilities and other types of communities, has it been more acceptable for families to move someone into care, but we still feel judgment and shame for not doing enough to take care of our family ourselves.

However, for many people, living in a community means having appropriate care and support, meaningful activities, and positive relationships – and it also means they are not worried about being a burden on their families. In fact, being a burden on family is one of the top worries reported by older adults. So while it can be uncomfortable to think about shame, doing so allows us to consider our vulnerability and look at our relationships in a different light.

We never know how much time we will have with our loved ones – it is too valuable to worry away on things we can't change. Instead we can focus on enjoying today and planning to maximize meaning and quality of life for the future, for whatever time we have left. It is okay to "let go of the burden" and become a partner in caring for your loved one. It will do you and your loved one good to move into a new phase of your caregiving relationship.

Also, now you have a team of partners: trained professionals who understand and specialize in caring for older adults. You have peace-of-mind that your loved one is in a nurturing environment, and you can get back to fully living your own life!

The thing your aging family members really need your help and support with is living. Our culture is so focused on youth and never aging or looking older. But aging is a phase in life just like childhood or adolescence. It can't be ignored or wished away, and it needs understanding and acceptance. Just as a wise parent learns to deal with the terrible twos or teenager angst, adult children need to adjust to and accepting their aging parents' limitations and needs. The same way parents help their children through tough phases, we can help our older loved ones by supporting their respect, dignity, independence, and choice.

Acknowledge the move as a loss for you as well. If your parent moved out of a home they've lived in for decades, you may have lost your childhood home -- and the knowledge that you really "can't go home again" can be difficult to process. Regardless of the house involved, your family has gone through a transition and transformation. The roles and responsibilities around you and your loved one are shifting and changing, and the relationship between you will feel different as well.

### **About family conflict:**

Each person in the family needs to grieve the losses that come with any transition. There is no right or wrong way to feel about a change or to process those feelings or timeline for doing so.

It helps if all family members can agree that you are each committed to a common goal, coming together to do what is best for the aging family member.



The siblings may never fix their hurt feelings that “Mom always liked you the best,” or maybe not everyone had the best relationship with dad. But we can all agree that as human beings, our aging family members deserve dignified treatment and respectful care.

As tensions relax, each person in the family becomes more open to hearing the same information and useful knowledge and skills for the perhaps unfamiliar roles facing them. This helps decrease caregiver burden and stress, and family satisfaction increases as each person learns to adapt.

If family tensions continue to cause concern, consider meeting with a counselor or consultant to discuss the situation. They can serve to facilitate the conversation and to emphasize the common ground that you all have: caring about someone and wanting what’s best for them (even if you disagree as to what that may be). Working with a neutral third party also keeps everyone on “good behavior” – less likely to regress into old patterns of behaviors ingrained in our family roles and history.

In many cases, families have benefitted from involving a care manager to handle logistics and serve as a point person for the whole family. This relieves the primary family caregiver of that responsibility and ends any “bossy” complaints or perceptions by others. It also allows family to be “just family” and not have to worry about all the care details and coordination.

**Caregiver self-care:**

**One of the most important pieces of this is taking care of yourself.**

Unfortunately, research has shown that it’s just not working for professionals to tell you that you need to take care of yourself in order to be there for your family member. Even though the research also shows that caregivers have higher levels of stress and therefore lower immunity and higher infections and illness rates.

The problem is that we are all more willing to help someone else than we are to receive help ourselves. So look at it this way:

**IT’S A MARATHON:**

**pace yourself, have regular support, and plan for the long term.**

or

**IT’S A MISSION:**

**there are many moving parts, you can’t do it alone,  
and you need to have back-up.**

**Caregiver burnout:**

It's important to know the signs of burnout, when you've hit your limit.

- Dread
- Tension
- Irritability
- Anger
- Fatigue
- Sadness
- Disturbed sleep
- Difficulty thinking clearly
- Difficulty making decisions
- Feeling distracted or jumpy

Burnout puts you at a higher risk for episodes of depression, anxiety, or panic, as well as more serious health problems.

Getting good support from your primary care doctor as well as a caregiver support coach or counselor is the best way to maximize your capacity.

***Make sure it's "mission accomplished" – run your best race!***

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*For more assistance, call Aging Care Consultation Services.  
Your first 15 minutes of consultation is free.  
Call 206.999.5934, or email [karin@agingcareconsult.com](mailto:karin@agingcareconsult.com).*