

When a Move is Necessary

Preparing and supporting the person with dementia

Moving is not easy

Relocation is one of the major causes of stress in a person's life. Moving to a different location becomes even more difficult if the person moving has dementia. A person with dementia depends on his or her familiar setting for cues about what to do. Moving represents a major loss.

Often a person with dementia is unable to problem solve and accurately judge when it is time to move. However, as the dementia progresses, there are various triggers for family members that can lead to a discussion about relocation:

- Increasing difficulty maintaining a house
- Emerging safety and health issues
- Development of increasing care needs
- Illness of the other spouse
- Being unable to leave home and maintain social connections
- Family members are long distance caregivers

An individual with dementia seldom says, "I think it is time to move". In fact, because of their changing abilities, they often become very much a "home body" and refuse to go out, especially to unfamiliar settings. Quite often, the feeling that they are losing control over their lives, results in defensiveness and resistance to suggestions to move by friends and family members. It can be challenging to get the person with dementia to see the need for a more supportive environment.

How to start the conversation

- Try to avoid any arguments, remain calm, and have a relaxed, smiling presence.

- Wait for openings in the conversation that will allow you to start the conversation.
- Try to make the conversation about you. For example, "I realize I don't have a durable power of attorney for health care or a will or trust, and I'm thinking about getting them. I'm wondering where you are with that?"
- Then gently shift into an advance care planning conversation about living arrangements.

Some strategies and suggestions on what to say

Depending on the proposed living arrangements, here are some strategies and suggestions on what to say:

- **First plant the seed.** Don't approach your relative as though you've already made the decision for him or her. Just mention that there are options that could make life easier and more fun.
- **Watch for a "teachable moment."** Did the person fall, but escape getting badly hurt? Use that as a springboard. You may want to wait a bit, or immediately say something like, "Wow, that was close. Once you're feeling better, maybe we could go look at the new retirement home over by the church. We'd both feel better if you had people around." Go with your gut on the timing, but use the "moment".
- **Don't push** unless you consider this an emergency. Wait for a day when your relative is feeling very lonely and saying he/she never sees her friends anymore. Then, gently, try again.
- **Use "I" statements** such as "I would love it if you could come for a visit. It's been so long and the grandchildren really miss you." or "I remember what a nice time we had shopping at that big mall near me the last time you visited." These kinds of statements will help remind your relative how

nice it would be to be closer, and to enjoy the rest of the family again without putting pressure on the person to make a decision.

- **Check with your friends** and friends of your relative. If thinking about relocation into a retirement home, see if any of them are already living happily in one nearby. Your relative may feel better if someone they know is already in a home.
- **Focus on the positive** such as “I understand that they have a wonderful cook and they will serve family dinners on request.” or “They have a full list of weekly activities which includes trips to the mall, outings to the park, as well as activities in their auditorium. You can even have your own hairdresser.”
- **Emphasize reduced stress.** If moving to a retirement home, stress the fact that there's no yard cleanup, but flowers can be tended to. There's no need to call a plumber if the sink breaks, but there are plenty of things to do if people want. There's plenty of freedom to be alone, but company when they desire it.
- **Emphasize increased socialization.** If moving from the country to the city, you could focus the conversation on the ease of transportation and going to doctor's appointments, meeting new friends, and participating in more activities.
- **Use professional connections.** Consult with professionals such as your doctor, Alzheimer Society staff and case worker, for their advice and support.

How to prepare and support the person with dementia

- Open and honest discussion with the person with dementia and other family members is an essential first step when you are trying to decide whether relocation is the right thing to do.

- Try and think about your relative's own values and preferences. Don't make a decision based on what you would prefer for yourself.
- Be a good listener.
- Talk through the difficult feelings, acknowledge the loss that your relative is experiencing and reassure him/her that you are all making the best decision possible.
- Talk to others who have been through this process. They may have other suggestions that you can try. Contact your local Alzheimer Society.
- Remember that changes in surroundings are often disturbing for those with dementia, so be prepared for a period of adjustment.

Further information on this topic

Visit the following websites:

- Family Caregiver Alliance
www.caregiver.org
- American Hospital Association
www.aha.org
- “When Home is No Longer an Option”
www.alzheimer.ca/ottawa
- “From Home to Retirement Home: A Guide for Caregivers of Persons with Dementia” www.rgpeo.com

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