

The Next Chapter

“My parents need more support. What can I do?”

Communicating to one’s mom and dad that it is not safe to continue living in their current home is one of the hardest things an adult child faces. It does not matter whether the parent is living in the family home or in a retirement community. When parents need more care, it often falls to the children to help make the best decision, as many older adults are in denial that they need more care.

This can be a role reversal for many adult children, which is often common at this stage in life. Actually, role reversal can be important and productive, because left unaddressed the status quo can be unsafe—physically and/or emotionally—for the parents.

What are some common signs that may indicate extra help is needed?

Most likely, you have noticed changes within your parents. As parents age, it is important to be aware of the increasing potential for falls to occur. For many, the risk of car accidents increases. Perhaps your parents’ vision or physical agility has declined. Is it becoming difficult for them to safely negotiate the stairs in their home or get in and out of the tub? Are they becoming more isolated, perhaps because they have stopped driving? Perhaps they are not eating properly, because it is harder for them to get groceries and cook. If they do cook, is the smoke alarm sounding? Are they having difficulty handling their finances?

Changes to be concerned about typically fall into a few categories, and any of the following changes can put your parents’ well-being at risk:

- 1. Physical changes:** sudden weight loss; bruises from falling; reduced personal grooming; increased difficulty with everyday activities, such as cooking, bathing, dressing, etc.
- 2. Risky changes:** poor medication management; keeping old/spoiled food in the refrigerator; unable to care for a pet; hiding or forgetting the number of falls; etc.
- 3. Emotional changes:** unusual depression, stress, or anxiety; a lack of enthusiasm for normal activities; less contact with friends and family, etc.
- 4. Cognitive changes:** forgetting names of people; unpaid bills; new minor dents in a car; unopened mail or packages; weight loss, as they won’t remember to shop, cook, or eat; etc.

It is good to validate your observations by collecting facts and seeking others’ input. Often, your parent’s friends and neighbors are well aware of your parents’ changing needs. If there are siblings, a reasonable first step is to talk with them and get their impressions. Clearly, it is best for all concerned

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when brothers and sisters agree about a situation and are involved in making decisions about next steps. If the siblings don't agree, though, it helps to trust the opinion of the person who spends the most time with the parents.

Keep in mind that parents can often put up a good face for their children for a short time. If there are underlying problems, though, eventually those will become apparent. It is healthier for everyone to complete a successful move before there is an urgent need, injury, or crisis.

What can a supportive living environment offer your parents?

As the name implies, assisted living (or residential care, as it is sometimes called) offers assistance and support with the normal tasks of daily living. There is also memory care/early dementia support available. The goal in all types is to offer a personalized level of care that enables your parents to continue living as independently as possible. It helps them to live a more enriched life than would be possible without the extra support. In fact, it is common for seniors to regain a higher functioning after they have moved to a higher level of care.

Small investment, big dividends.

Medicine management is a common service that is provided. It's a small act; however, the ramifications can be significant. People who forget to take their medicine properly can experience a range of problems that can include memory challenges, loss of appetite, heart palpitations, depression, and other issues. This can lead to stress for the individuals as well as those who care about them.

By addressing the specific problems, individuals feel like themselves again and seek to participate in activities they've always enjoyed.

Other common types of assistance include:

- Help with bathing and dressing
- Regular meals and good nutrition (with the side benefit of eating with others and forging new friendships)
- Help with light housekeeping, laundry
- Easy accessibility and accommodations for most physical disabilities
- Emergency call systems
- Scheduled transportation to medical appointments and shopping
- Care plan coordinated by family physician and nursing staff

Most retirement communities also provide many opportunities for residents to socialize and enhance their physical and spiritual well-being while maintaining their personal privacy.

Prepare for “the talk;” do your homework.

Gather as much information as possible ahead of the conversation with your parents. The more you know about this topic, the more prepared you are to articulate your thoughts, answer questions, handle surprises, and maintain a calm and respectful tone. If you are relaxed and confident, your parents will be more apt to respond positively to whatever you present.

To prepare for the discussion, Touchmark retirement counselors are available to help your family

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and/or to talk directly with your parents. Other helpful sources are your parents' physician(s), clergy, or trusted friends.

Put yourself in your parents' shoes.

It would be much easier if your parents called you one day and said, "You know, honey, we've been thinking that it would be a good idea for us to move into an assisted living community." Many seniors don't do that, because the idea of moving from their present home into a place of greater dependence is a paralyzing thought.

Consider what they may be feeling:

- Fear and confusion about their future
- Fear of losing their independence and sense of identity
- Grief over losing the family home/downsizing personal possessions
- Embarrassment or even anger at becoming "the child" as you become "the parent"
- A sense of vulnerability due to circumstances beyond their control
- Stress, depression, denial

If you can see the situation from your parents' perspective, you will be more sympathetic to their fears and objections and better able to address those. Acknowledging and respecting their feelings will go a long way in gaining their trust and willingness to work toward your common goal of finding a safe and enriching environment for them.

Get started: Use questions to introduce the topic.

You might assume that your parents already are aware that they need extra help and that something needs to change. Rather than telling your parents what you observe, try asking questions that can lead to a healthy discussion.

Here are other examples of questions you may want to ask as conversation starters:

- Are you able to get out of the house as much as you would like?
(To visit friends, go shopping, etc.?)
- Do you ever get lonely here? Are you feeling depressed? Anxious? Scared?
- Do you wish you had some extra help around the house that friends and family are not able to provide?
- Do you eat as well as you think you should? Do you get tired of cooking?
- Do you ever worry about your safety? Leaving a burner on? Falling and not being able to get up? Getting in and out of the tub? Climbing the stairs?
- Do you always remember to take your medications on time?

Of course, the specific questions you ask will be based on your own observations and concerns. Be sure to listen carefully to their answers.

Offer a timeframe for the possible move.

The best conversation is one that starts before the person you care about is in danger or lonely and isolated. Seniors who voluntarily choose to make a move will be much happier and better adjusted than those who feel they have been rushed or forced into making a decision. The thought of moving can be so scary to some, though, that many deny even fairly obvious problems.

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Unfortunately, the risks of waiting can be high. Inaction could lead to a crisis, and waiting for your parents to make the decision could be dangerous.

What's next?

Once you have approached the subject with your parents, you can begin the process of exploring appropriate options. Involve them in the research. If money is a concern, offer to review their financial situation with them. Seek help from health care providers. Meet with knowledgeable retirement counselors. Perhaps most importantly, do not rely on a single tour to make a decision about a retirement community. Arrange to spend time—and several visits—to meet other residents, sample the food, and participate in activities.

To help avoid multiple moves, it can be very important to explore communities that offer a broad continuum of care and services. A husband and wife are rarely on identical health tracks, and too many seniors move two to three times late in life chasing higher levels of care.

If your parents already are living in a retirement community and require a higher level of care, go with them and visit the other area(s). Perhaps your parents have friends who have already moved to another part of the retirement community. If so, encourage your parents to talk with their friends. One of the advantages of a retirement community offering different levels of care is that your parents will still be close to people they know.

Helping parents make the decision about moving is an act of love. That is because moving to a supportive environment can provide one's parents with the opportunity to succeed and enjoy life to the fullest. Often that starts by acknowledging and addressing the limitations that are a natural byproduct of aging; then doing something about it.

For further reading ...

Touchmark

Touchmark.com

Touchmark offers information about independent and assisted living as well as memory care, white papers about a range of topics, and stories of people who are leading successful lives in a supported environment after a well-planned move. Each Touchmark community offers complimentary family consultations, home visits, and tours by professional retirement counselors.

HelpGuide.org

www.helpguide.org/elder/assisted_living_facilities.htm

A nonprofit organization offering guidance on a variety of health challenges, including *Tips for Choosing a Facility and Making the Transition*.

Alz.org

www.alz.org/care/alzheimers-dementia-care-housing.asp

If you have reason to believe that your parent is experiencing the beginning stages of age-related dementia or Alzheimer's disease, please consult with your physician. An assisted living community is not appropriate for those with serious, degenerative memory loss.