



CARE *Patrol*™

Your Partner In Senior Care Solutions



A Family Guide

The First 30 Days After Move-In



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EMOTIONAL ISSUES: INTRODUCTION

I feel so relieved - and so guilty for feeling that way. Are my feelings normal?

Guilt. Resentment. Confusion. Relief. All of these and more are common and understandable reactions to a family member moving into an assisted living community. It doesn't matter if the move was long overdue, the result of a sudden illness or due to a drastic change in circumstance. Such a major change resonates throughout a family, creating concern not only about the care their loved one will receive, but also about the many emotionally-charged issues that the move does not seem to resolve.



HELPING YOUR LOVED ONES ADJUST

How can I help Dad settle into his new home?



You might help your family member settle into life in the assisted living community best by remembering that he's not just moving into a home, but into his new home. Ask your father how he would like his home decorated and arranged. You can help him make that home as comfortable and personal as possible. Although it's important that any decorative item not interfere with the caregiving mission or policies of the assisted living community, thoughtful decorating can help the assisted living community meet its goals of caring not just for the body, but for the mind and spirit of its residents as well.

Don't forget to discuss your decorating ideas with staff members. Some of the best ideas for brightening up a family member's room can come from the staff who see them every day.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:

- You can help restore some sense of a home environment by decorating your father's room with things brought from his home. In borrowing from the former home environment, try to go beyond just moving items from the old into the new. Instead, try also to capture and recreate the same mood, texture and tone.
- Bring things your dad made or collected. Bring items that have always been important to him, like a chair, picture or coffee table.
- Provide photos of yourself or your family. Get the children involved in creating handmade items for all occasions. Create collages of children's photos, and bring or send wall decorations to commemorate holidays. In most cases, the brighter and more cheerful, the better.
- Stimulate all the senses. Borrow decorating ideas from Mother Nature - nothing can be as refreshing as a bit of the outdoors brought indoors. Find flowers, colorful leaves and other reminders of the seasons to help brighten his room.
- Provide paintings, prints or other artwork depicting his favorite subjects. If he is religious, consider including sacred art.
- If your father is able to enjoy them, supply him with magazines, books and newspapers; if not, bring books on tape or music to play. If he subscribed to a paper, keep it coming.
- Provide a telephone and TV if his room can accommodate them.

Mother's still angry and keeps saying she wants to go home. Will she ever adjust to the move?

If you've ever moved yourself, especially out of town, you've already experienced a part of what your mother is going through. But add to that the stress she's experiencing from the loss of her cherished independence, from living in unfamiliar surroundings with scores of strangers, and from trying to accept you in the unnatural role of caregiver, and you'll begin to understand just how major a life change this can be. Suffice it to say that the first 30 days may be uncomfortable for both of you. Don't be surprised if during the early days of your mother's residency, the whole family experiences some degree of guilt, tension, fear or fatigue. Your mother is likely to do or say things that will upset you and make you feel guilty. She may express either verbally or non-verbally her dissatisfaction with the new arrangements and her desire to go home. She may act mad or hurt, or berate or ignore you.



Remember that these behaviors - and your reactions to them - are perfectly normal under the circumstances. Adjusting to their new living arrangements is a process that all residents go through in their own way, and at their own speed. The adjustment won't be accomplished overnight, but as the days turn into weeks, you'll find your mother talking less about her old home and more about her new home. In the meantime, the staff is always there to help see you through the peaks and valleys of this very emotional experience. Don't be afraid to ask for a little moral support.

COPING WITH GUILT AND RESENTMENT

Mom and I chose this assisted living community because we thought it was the best thing for her, but she treats me like I'm abandoning her to pursue my own selfish pleasures. How can I remind her that we have her best interests at heart?

The decision to move a family member to an assisted living community setting is never an easy one. But whenever you begin to doubt the decision, remember the many advantages an assisted living community offers your family member.



THESE INCLUDE:

- 24-hour care, with medical assistance always available.
- A roommate, with whom many residents form a deep and lasting bond that proves both invigorating and supportive.
- A sense of community and activity which can encourage residents to get up, dress and get out to enjoy a community meal in the dining room or an organized activity in the recreation room.
- Staff members who become attached to the people in their care and work to make their lives as comfortable and interesting as possible.
- Regular clergy visits and religious services.
- Activities, educational programs, group discussions and outings.
- Personalized physical, occupational, speech and restorative therapies.
- Trained caregivers who teach skills and promote self-care.
- Medical staff that tracks the individual progress of each resident, as well as their medical needs, on a daily basis.
- Tasty and nutritious hot meals on a regular schedule, with help for those who need it, and special attention for those whose diets need to be monitored.
- More satisfying relationships with their family members. With the stress of routine daily care transferred to home staff, family now has sufficient energy and time to devote to the emotional needs of their mom.

I know my mother should be here, but I promised her years ago that we'd never put her in an assisted living community. I feel like I've gone back on my word.

One of the most difficult situations a person can face in life is having to move an elderly family member into an assisted living community after having promised - often years before - not to. The decision can lead to guilt and self-doubt, and if it's not resolved, even to depression. If you've had to break such a promise, whether it was expressed or only implied, it's important to take some time to separate what you feel about your decision from what you know. For example, even though you may feel as though keeping that kind of promise is very important, you may also know that it was no longer safe for your mother to live alone.

REMEMBER:

- As circumstances change in your life, so too, do your options. The “best” solution to a problem ten years ago might not be the best solution today. If you did make a promise not to institutionalize your family member, it was probably made at a time when home care and independent living weren't practical options. If they are no longer practical options, they should not be considered just because they seemed like good solutions years ago.
- All you can give is your best. If you've considered all the options and have made the best decision you can, you have nothing to feel guilty about. The guilt that often accompanies placing a family member in an assisted living community can actually debilitate you or drive you to give more than you can possibly give.
- Doing the impossible to keep your family member at home is precisely that: impossible. Few people can provide the 24-hour care an assisted living community can provide. Your family member needs you for more than lodging, meals and medication. She needs your love, something that can be hard to provide when you're constantly drained, both physically and emotionally. Often the only way to do your primary job right is to turn your secondary over to another.
- Try to listen to your head. It's very difficult to get over the emotional reaction of moving a family member to an assisted living community. Remember though, that being relieved of the daily physical and emotional stress of a practically impossible home care situation can enable you to enjoy your relationship again. And the time it frees up can be used constructively with your own family or in taking an active role in the assisted living community activities, both of which will provide support for your own adjustment.
- You're not alone. At the heart of almost all guilt suffered from placing a family member in an assisted living community is the unspoken doubt that a promise has been broken. Talk to someone who has made a similar decision and shares your conflicting emotions. Then, ask them to share how they coped with the guilt and how they feel about their decision in retrospect.
- If your assisted living community has a family council, visit with some of the members. See Family Councils.



Even though I was killing myself trying to take care of my mom and family both, since she's moved to the home I've felt even worse. Instead of appreciating all the staff does for her, I resent them for caring for Mom better than I could, and guilty for being so childish. What is wrong with me?



Nothing is wrong with you, any more than there is something wrong with the young mother who is crushed when her only child comes home in love with his kindergarten teacher. There comes a point in all of our lives when we cannot provide our loved ones with everything they need to be happy - when we discover that at this stage in our loved one's life, our best efforts are not as successful as our best efforts combined with those of another. Sure you feel resentful, and probably a little left out. You used to be the center of your mom's universe, and now you feel like an orbiting planet, at best. Don't fret. This too shall pass. Soon you'll get to know the staff and realize that they're not taking your mom away from you. Moreover, you'll discover that what you can offer your mom, no one else can provide.

In the meantime, share your feelings either with someone on the staff, or someone who's been in a similar position, like a Family Council member. Don't worry about sounding silly. Your reaction is more common than you think.

When my wife and I lived together, I was there for her every minute of every day. How can an assisted living community provide that kind of care?

It can't. On the other hand, it can provide a lot of things you couldn't, and the tradeoff might prove healthier for everyone involved. Granted, your wife may have to wait a couple of minutes for help to get to supper. On the other hand, she'll have people her own age to eat and talk with, as well as a diet tailored to her needs. And while she won't have you there to help plan her day, an entire staff of professionals with years of experience with her age group will be scheduling activities for the entire community to enjoy. Moreover, she'll still be getting what she needs most from you, frequent visits full of gossip and confidences, trips out to her favorite hairstylist - in short, the kind of individual attention only a family member can provide. But one type of care doesn't preclude the other. Take the opportunity to visit with the staff about your wife's likes and dislikes. The quicker they get to know her, the sooner they can try to personalize the attention she will be receiving.



As the only relative in town, I feel I have too much responsibility for Mom, while my sisters out of town feel guilty for not helping more. How can we share the load more equitably?

Your mom is only the first of many family members who will find this life change stressful. Moving a close relative to an assisted living community brings to the surface all kinds of life issues that we often keep on the back burner. If not handled right, it can also stir up old resentments, sibling rivalries and control issues that you thought were buried years ago.



Remember, this dramatic development in the life of the new resident is also a watershed in the lives of her family members, for the event forces each to come face to face with a new family role, accept the new limitations of other family members and grapple with the reminder of her own mortality. Often, the caregiver who has assumed the major responsibility for the decision has become the primary caregiver by default, as the only close relative in proximity. By the time the decision is actually made, she may feel exhausted and depressed, as well as resentful of all of the responsibilities. At the same time, she will undoubtedly have made the best decision she could and be both resentful of criticism and possessive of future decision-making. On the other hand, out-of-town relatives who only see their family member rested, medicated and dressed for "company," may argue for care options that they would realize were unrealistic if they were the primary caregiver for just a day. All family members need to make a concerted effort to empathize with others' points of view and the needs and conflicts they face.

For the primary caregiver, it's crucial to remember that failure to keep other family members informed on developments only makes the transition harder for all involved. Out-of-town relatives who are only informed of major decisions may feel they are lurching from disaster to disaster, with no control or input. But the primary caregiver can help put them back "in control" of their lives by providing them with regular progress reports and suggestions as to what to send or when to plan their visits. She can also help by preparing them for what they will see since changes in an assisted living community resident's appearance will seem more drastic to them than to her. If appropriate, the primary caregiver might even review possible future scenarios, soliciting feedback before a decision has to be made, and subtly informing out-of-towners of what might have to be considered in the future.

For the distant caregiver, it's important to empathize with the extra demands placed on the nearby family member in her role as primary caregiver. In addition to caring for mom, she still has to manage her home, her family, her job, etc. Try to keep family discussions of options and decisions as open and uncritical as possible. Everyone should feel free to express opinions and suggestions without fear of emotional retaliation. When it comes down to the nitty-gritty of decision-making, strive for consensus, but don't force it. Try to get only those commitments from family members that can be given honestly and realistically. If that leads to nothing decisive or realistic, try to agree on a temporary or trial measure, recognizing that some family members do not favor the option, but that, as yet, no other solution has presented itself. Put all involved family members on the mailing list so everyone gets the same correspondence from the community.

Remember, too, that it's unreasonable to expect a better relationship between family members than they had before the assisted living community decision. Keep in mind that you and your family members will not always be caregivers for an elderly relative. Trying to squeeze a family member into a caregiving role that doesn't fit may ultimately do more harm than good.

MAKING YOUR VISITS COUNT AND VISITING BY MAIL



Dad and I never did talk much, and now conversations are even harder. What can I talk about that won't make us both uncomfortable?



Often relatives and friends find it painfully difficult to visit a family member during the early days of his residency. They may feel it their "duty" to keep the conversation light and to avoid any discussion of topics that could make the situation uncomfortable. But talking about the "uncomfortable" things can be therapeutic for assisted living community residents - and for their family members. If he can't talk frankly with you, his family member, who will he be able to "talk it out" with? Knowing that you won't flinch from difficult issues might help your dad grapple with them all the sooner.

YOU CAN HELP MAKE YOUR CONVERSATIONS MORE PRODUCTIVE IN OTHER WAYS AS WELL:

- Often conversations in the early days of residency revolve around the decision to admit the family member to the home. When discussing it, avoid loaded terms like "helpless" and "incompetent" - terms that strike at the heart of your family member's self-concept. Instead, stress the more objective side of your case: "Your condition requires that you have 24-hour care."
- Use your conversation to lovingly motivate your family member. If you say, "You can't even get out of your wheelchair by yourself," in essence, you are saying that he may as well give up. If you know he can do better, and you say, "After you can transfer from your wheelchair to a chair, maybe we can plan an outing in the car," you're inspiring him to achieve.
- Finally, remember that the most important part of any conversation is the time you spend listening. A relative who says, "I want to go home," wants to feel that you care.
- Turning away from his honest expression of emotion because it makes you feel uncomfortable will only make further communication more difficult. Instead, encourage him to talk about home and the things he misses. Then listen! Listen as you would to your boss or your spouse - carefully and patiently. Accept the fact that at first a lot of his conversation will cover the same ground over and over, but don't feel as though the conversation is pointless. Realize, instead, that your family member is working through a major life change in the best way available to him, and he needs your help.

How can visits seem like they used to be at her home?

Geriatric care providers recognize that sometimes the best therapy in the world is a visit from a loved one. Unfortunately, visits can sometimes be an emotional challenge for family members - and instead of tackling the challenge, too often they give up altogether. Successful visiting is like any other social skill - it can be improved upon with a little bit of work and some practice. The payoff will be more enjoyable visits for both you and your loved one.

CONSIDER THESE TIPS FOR BETTER VISITING:

- Plan ahead. You can help avoid the “duty” of the visit by remembering why you used to visit your relative before she became a resident. Then, fill the visit with similar activities. If you shared a passion for jigsaw puzzles, bring one along, and help her get it started. If you’re both big readers, start to read a book aloud. You can read a chapter each time you visit. Write letters for her, take her out to lunch, meet her new friends or brag about the kids - with grade cards, photographs, school projects and even videos to back you up! The possibilities are endless, but the point is to think ahead.
- Remember that this is a visit to your family member’s new home, not a hospital room. Fill the visit with things you felt comfortable doing before she entered the home. Touch, if it feels natural to do so, and talk as you used to. Take her for lunch and to the mall, or out to get her hair done. Ask your family member for a tour of the home. Don’t feel pressured to entertain; instead, if she’s able, let her be a hostess to you.
- Don’t fear reminiscing. Gerontologists are showing that such “life review” is an important adjustment mechanism that helps elderly people put their situations into perspective and deal with lingering conflicts.
- Get to know the staff. These care providers are part of the extended family that constantly works to improve the overall quality of life for your loved one. Fill them in on your family’s favorite stories about your mom, and about her personal idiosyncrasies, to help them understand her individual needs.
- Remember you’re an important link to the outside world. If she wants to gossip, then gossip. Keep her involved in the family, the community and the church. Don’t be afraid to seek the same amount of advice and comfort from her as you did before she moved into the home. Sometimes you’ll have to let her vent her anger and frustration at the situation and new limitations. But remember, you don’t have to remedy the problem in order to be of some help, you just have to listen.
- Volunteer to help in the community’s group activities to get better acquainted.



My kids can sometimes be a handful. Should I bring them on visits, or will they just wear Dad out?

Bring them. It's easy to underestimate the importance of a connection between children and elder family members, but studies show that the relationship between grandparent and grandchild is second only to that of parent and child. For the elder person, this is an opportunity to satisfy a natural wish to continue in a family role. It allows him to pass on feelings and attitudes to another generation - to share what is important in his life with someone whose life is important to him.



- If your family member can communicate, let the child and family member play games like Tic-Tac-Toe or Hangman, simple card games, checkers or dominoes. Share coloring books and drawings. Think of games from your own childhood, or better yet, help your family member think of games from his childhood to share.
- Don't be concerned about the commotion that always accompanies kids. It can be a welcome change to the usually sedate home environment, and studies show that even unrelated elderly people enjoy seeing children at open parties or public activities.
- Encourage physical intimacy between children and elderly family members, particularly if the resident can't speak. Kids can tend to be bashful in this kind of situation, but model eye contact, hand-holding, back rubbing and hugging for them. Simply holding a baby is often therapeutic for residents who can't interact well.
- Occasionally bring, or send ahead of time, a small gift for the family member to give to the child.
- If you have problems managing the visit, take only one child at a time. Just allow enough time for a fruitful visit.
- If the resident is not actually your children's grandparent, show your appreciation for his willingness to take on the grandparent role. If he is, reserve to him as many of the traditional rights and privileges of a grandparent as possible. For example, make sure that, short of the immediate family, he's the first to see grade cards, dance costumes, etc.
- Be sure to visit on days that are special for the children, such as Halloween (in costume), the first day of school (in uniform), etc. It helps keep your family member involved in the children's lives. Try to continue or build new family traditions: "It's what we always do when we visit Grandpa."
- Encourage older kids to pursue their so-called "living history," in which older family members bring history alive by telling children their unique role in the public events of their lifetime. Encourage the elderly family member to open up by providing the child with questions like: What was it like learning in a one-room schoolhouse? What was the Depression? How did people get along? What was life like during World War II? You lived on a farm? You milked cows? Give adolescents a small recorder, and start an oral history of your family.

Mom's assisted living community is two towns over, and I can't always visit. Should I send mail?

Few things can brighten a resident's day more than receiving mail. Whether you use it to stay in touch with a family member between visits or to remember a distant family member you can't visit as often as you'd like, don't ignore these therapeutic benefits of regular letters and notes to your family member:



- Start small. A bright and cheerful greeting card can be as welcome as a long letter -sometimes better. A simple, short note is better than nothing; the importance of mail is the connection, not necessarily the content.
- Take note of special occasions like St. Valentine's Day, Mother's and Father's Days, holidays, family birthdays and anniversaries. Relay children's news regarding school, vacation, Scouts and Little League.
- Since mail can double as decoration for your family member's room, select bright, colorful note cards, scenic postcards or page-a-day calendar classics that she'll enjoy seeing on her walls.
- Send photos featuring the activities and accomplishments of you and your family: show her your garden, the kids after a day at the beach, a newly decorated room, a pet or your new hairstyle.
- Invite the kids to contribute a finger painting or a handmade card. Mail appropriate wall decorations to commemorate holidays. Send an envelope of colorful leaves in autumn.
- If your family member has moved from your community, clip the local newspaper for class reunions, school activities, engagements and births, local elections or other items of interest to her. If she has trouble reading the small print of the paper, recopy the stories in large print, or enlarge them on a copy machine. Don't forget gift subscriptions to her favorite magazines. (Some even have large-print editions.)
- Remember that it will often be a staff member who receives and directs your letter, so address it fully -including the family member's full name - and add your return address. Date the letter. Identify all of the people in the photographs you send. When you mention people by name, include a brief reminder of who the person is.
- If you know your family member will be reading the letter herself, make it easy on her eyes. Print in large letters with a dark ink on light paper. If your family member is capable of writing in return, make sure she has a supply of stationery, pre-addressed envelopes and postage stamps - and don't forget that even postage stamps come in a huge variety now.



Dad seems to be getting all the support he needs, but what about me? Where can I go for some encouragement and feedback?

To the person responsible for caring for a family member, it may sometimes seem that there is no lack of support for the elderly, but very little support for the caregiver. Check out some of these resources for caregiver support:

Outside the assisted living community



- Many local phone directories now include an index of “helpful numbers” which may include a category for aging or elderly care. Look for state and local offices on aging, plus local programs sponsored by nursing facilities, hospitals or civic organizations. If phone numbers are not indexed in that way, check the county and city listings for a local office on aging, the Area Agency on Aging, the health department or local senior facilities.
- Monitor the health section of your local newspaper and the community calendar. Visit the local library and talk to the librarian. Information on support for the elderly and their caregivers often funnels through these sources.

Inside the assisted living community

Talk with the assisted living community administrators, social workers and staff. They can often sort out and identify the conflicting emotions you may be experiencing, as well as provide some practical solutions for some of the more mundane problems you are facing.

Remember that many of the same issues plague all family members in the early days of a new residency; even when you most feel like it, you are not alone!



- If you cannot find a support group for caregivers, consider starting one of your own. The structure of the group may be as formal or informal as you wish, but you should try to meet at least monthly, even if you’re only starting out with a few members. Choose a place and time convenient for all, and try to develop a particular theme for each meeting. Keep names and addresses of the people who do attend, and ask your assisted living community administrator for names of others who might be interested in attending. Give and take support liberally within the group - sharing with your peers is often the best resource of all.
- The assisted living community may also have a family association or family council that YOU could join. These groups usually meet on an ongoing basis and feature programs, speakers, family issue forums, social events and fundraisers.

What is a family council?

A family council in an assisted living community is, in effect, a consumer advocate group, comprised of relatives and friends of the community’s residents. A typical council meets monthly at the community, is run by the relatives and friends of the residents and focuses its energies on several established goals and objectives. Usually a staff member of the assisted living community serves in an advisory capacity to the council but is not actually a member of the council.



What is the purpose of family councils?



A family council has two main goals: to protect and improve the quality of life in the community and within the long term care system as a whole and to give families a voice in decisions that affect them and their residents. Family councils can be responsible for organizing everything from spring clean-ups at the community, to staff appreciation events and welcome visits for families of new residents. They can also serve as important sources of information and support to families of new residents who are still struggling with both the practical and the emotional ramifications of their relative's new living arrangements.

I want to do more than simply visit my husband in the assisted living community. Do homes ever need volunteers?

Yes, assisted living community administrators are usually delighted at the prospect of a new volunteer, especially one whose family member is a resident. Keep in mind that there are other ways of getting involved, as well.

- Ask about participating in one of the various councils the community may offer, like the Dietary Council, Program Council, Family Council, etc.
- During your visits, don't confine yourself to your family member's room. Get to know the staff, the daily routine, the programs available, etc. Make a point of telling the staff how you appreciate any extra things they do for your husband - remember that he might be unable or unlikely to provide them with the kind of feedback that makes their jobs more rewarding.
- Find out what services and support groups are available in your area. Contact the assisted living community's administration, the American Association of Retired Persons, the Alzheimer's Association and other organizations with chapters in your area.
- Inform yourself on political issues and candidates related to the aged on both the local and national level. Write or call legislators about your concerns.



VISITING POLICIES AND TRIPS OUT OF THE HOME



Can I take Mom out sometimes?

Of course. Residents are encouraged to go on outings as much as possible. Plan outings for your relative, especially on Sundays, holidays, family birthdays and anniversaries.

If overnight outings are planned, check with your community regarding the policy on overnight stays.

If I take Mom out, does she need to be back by a certain time?

Not usually. However, the assisted living staff needs to know when you are leaving and your estimated time of return. Medications may be given to you for your mom.





What personal items should I pack for my wife?

First, ask your wife which clothes or special items she would like to bring. Then, ask your community for its recommended clothing list, as well as if your wife's situation warrants additional items.



Should I send Mom's personal items and valuables with her?

Ask your mother if she would be upset if an item was broken or lost. If the answer is "yes," don't send it. Leave expensive jewelry, cash, credit cards and valuable collector's items at home.

Is there someone in the community I can leave some cash with, so Dad will have money if he needs it?

Your father may need cash for the gift shop or the barber shop. See the business office manager about setting up a personal account that he can access to cover these personal expenses.

How will my wife's clothing be laundered and how often?

Find out how the laundry is handled on the floor your wife is assigned to. There may be a particular bin or room for dirty clothes, and in the beginning, it may help if you make sure your wife's clothes get there. Also, make sure she has plenty of clothes to wear while her dirty clothes are being laundered. If she is incontinent, she may need additional clothing.

How can I help keep Mom's clothes from getting lost?

A community the size of an assisted living community is responsible for laundering clothing and linens for scores of people, and it can be a challenge to keep everything straight. Upon admission, the staff will begin an inventory of your mom's items that will be kept on her chart.

After admission, you'll need to let the community know if additional items are brought in or removed. It won't be long before staff members recognize her clothes themselves. Don't panic if something turns up missing. First, check to make sure that it wasn't taken home by another family member. Then, report the missing item to the staff.

How should I mark Dad's clothing?

Since markings can wash out with repeated launderings, the best way to mark his clothes is with sewn-in labels, especially if the clothes are dark. Check his clothing periodically to see if the name tag is still legible, and be sure to get all clothing marked before it comes into the home.



Can I do my husband's laundry at home?

Probably, but check with the assisted living community. Make sure there's an adequate supply of clothes available to your husband while you're laundering his dirty clothes at home.



Will Dad be made to eat food he doesn't like?



No, but the staff cannot be expected to know what those foods might be unless you or he tell them. The staff will try to encourage your father to try different foods, and they will help him order and season his food the way he likes it as soon as they learn his preferences. Many nursing facilities now offer more of a selection so that each resident can choose what he or she feels like eating from two to three selections.

Who will help my aunt eat?

Everyone who needs assistance in eating receives it. Your aunt will be encouraged to feed herself if at all possible, because eating can be a very important part of physical or occupational therapy. Special equipment may be used to help her eat independently. If she is unable to do so, however, someone will help her.

Can I stay to eat supper with Dad occasionally?

Certainly! Your dining with him will add to his pleasure. Since each assisted living community has its own policies on guest meals, ask to meet with the dining services manager for details on advance notice, meal times, cost (if any) and any other services the community might provide. For example, some communities offer a special menu and a special dining room so that you can take your father “out to eat” without leaving the community. With these amenities, he can also take you and your family “out” for a meal!



Grandpa's supposed to be on a low-salt diet. Who will make sure he sticks to it?

There are really two issues here. One is that your grandfather is on a sodium (salt) restricted diet for health reasons. The other is that he has the right to choose whether or not to follow that diet. No one can force him to follow it. He will be provided with meals that are planned to meet the dietary restrictions ordered by his physician and that will also be nutritionally adequate. If he asks for food that is not allowed on his diet, or obtains food from other sources that is not allowed, he will be counseled on the potential negative consequences of not following his diet. You can assist by encouraging him to follow his diet.

I'd like to surprise my mother-in-law with some of her favorite foods occasionally. Is there any reason I can't bring her treats occasionally?

No, but discuss it with the dietitian or dining services manager first to ensure that the item does not conflict with her diet. Each time you bring in an item, let the dining services manager or caregiver know. Also try to time your visits so that your mother-in-law can eat the item. The facilities have strict regulations to follow on storing and refrigerating foods to keep them as safe as possible. If you bring in something for her to keep in her room that can be stored at room temperature, also bring in an airtight container to store it in (provided that the community's policies allow this).



How fast will Mom's call light be answered?

Almost immediately, especially if the staff is aware of some problem your mother is experiencing, for example shortness of breath while she's fighting a cold. Moreover, the staff does not rely solely on residents' signals for help. The staff checks everyone on a regular basis, whether they have requested assistance or not.



How involved is my husband's doctor?

The assisted living community staff is in regular contact with your husband's doctor. Family members are encouraged to keep in close touch with the physician themselves but must remember that it is the assisted living staff that will be carrying out the medical orders that come directly from the doctor. If you're not sure that something got passed on to your husband's caregiver, be sure and ask them about it.

My uncle is supposed to take half a dozen pills at all different times of the day. Will someone make sure he keeps to his schedule?

Yes, you can rest assured that medications are monitored very strictly in the assisted living community and that the medical staff is continually checking and double-checking medication schedules.

How many people work a given shift? Is the weekend staff adequate? What is the staff-to-resident ratio?

Staffing requirements are set by federal guidelines designed to provide enough staff for the appropriate care level at all times. Ask the caregiver in charge of your family member for the specific statistics for your assisted living community.

Does the staff take everyone to group activities or only those who express an interest? I know my mother-in-law would enjoy some of them, but I'm not sure she'll think to ask.

All residents able to attend activities will be encouraged to do so. In fact, the staff is required to have a personal plan of care for each resident that includes activities and programs. This plan of care will be personally tailored to your family member's physical and cognitive abilities. If your mother-in-law wishes, you can attend care planning meetings, usually held quarterly, and any group activities.

Who will be taking my grandmother to the bathroom and how often? Will someone get her up at night, or will she use a bedpan?

The community maintains appropriate staffing 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Members of that staff will continually check on your grandmother to monitor bathroom needs. At night, and depending on her condition, your grandmother may choose the bathroom or prefer a bedpan to getting out of bed. Some residents, of course, will require a bedpan.

Who will do my father-in-law's hair, teeth and nails? Is that up to the family?

No, this kind of care is also strictly mandated by federal guidelines. Hygienic guidelines are very specific, and assisted living community staff is fully responsible for making sure your father-in-law's body, hair and teeth are clean.

How frequently will my father be bathed and by whom?

Your father's caregiver should be able to answer this question for you but as a rule, residents are bathed once weekly, usually by an aide, but sometimes by a caregiver. Individual needs may dictate a more frequent schedule, however, so check to see whether your father falls into this category.

Do residents receive any attention during the night or only if they wake up and signal for help?

The assisted living staff conducts regular rounds to check on each resident during the night. Check with your caregiver to see how often they do this for your family member.

Will my wife's therapies continue on weekends?

Not usually. Most therapies are planned for Monday through Friday.

COMPLAINTS



How should I handle complaints?

If your family member complains, remember:

- Never hastily dismiss a family member's complaint. Even if a complaint seems petty or simply registers as a way to convey dissatisfaction with new limitations, ignoring it will only further damage your relative's morale.
- In many cases, all the complainant wants is for you to listen, support and comfort him as he adjusts to his new environment.
- Try to really listen to what he is trying to say. (See Helping your loved one adjust.) Don't prejudge the validity of the complaint, and pay particular attention to his verbal cues, body language, facial expressions, posture and gestures. All can help you determine the seriousness of his complaint.
- Complaining is not limited to verbal expression. The onset of depression, an increase in anxiety or the development of a tendency to withdraw into hostility and unresponsiveness can themselves be forms of complaint.
- Always respond to complaints, whether they are well founded or not. Use facial expressions, gestures, statements, questions and comments to show you're listening. Don't get upset, and don't be condescending or patronizing.



Treat your family member as an equal in the conversation.

- If you do feel a complaint could be warranted, bring it up to a staff member with whom you are comfortable. Lingering or more serious complaints should be taken up with the home's administration. Most communities have a specific complaint procedure. If you're uncertain, ask.
- Be sure your relative is kept informed that everyone is working on the complaint, and give him status reports.
- Although you should always bring complaints to the attention of the staff first, you should also be aware of the other avenues available to you when resolving problems. Amendments made in 1978 to the Federal Older Americans Act set up an ombudsman program in each state to help family members who have complaints about nursing facilities and long-term care facilities. Residents or relatives should be encouraged to report any unresolved complaints to this or similar programs in their area.





What does Medicare cover?



Medicare is a short-term federal program providing funds according to medical need. In most cases, Medicare does not cover assisted living costs. In some states, there may be programs available to help pay for some of the care costs.

What is Medicaid?

Medicaid is a federal program administered by state agencies, based on financial need. Some states may have special programs where Medicaid will pay for assisted living costs. Many times the beds and choices are limited.

What does supplemental or long-term insurance cover?

Insurance coverage is available to cover certain costs of assisted living community care. Some plans will pay for a portion of the daily expense for a set amount of days in an assisted living community. These policies may be in the form of supplemental or long-term insurance. If your family member has such insurance coverage, bring a copy of the policy to the attention of the assisted living community. Work with the administrative staff to discuss how they want to file claims to get the best benefits.



ISSUES UNIQUE TO SPOUSES OF RESIDENTS



I just moved my wife into an assisted living community, and I'm beside myself. I just wander through the house, trying to think of something to do. It's as if she were dead!



The hardest thing some spouses of assisted living residents have to face is their own fear of being alone. When suddenly a lifelong companion is no longer there, it's easy to panic and feel anxious or disoriented. The best thing to do to combat these feelings of loneliness and anxiety is to keep busy. If you're employed, don't take too much time off right away. Work will keep you busy and won't give you as much time to worry. If you don't work, look into short-term volunteer work. Choose an area in which you might eventually like to volunteer permanently. Whether it be community service, a political campaign or just helping out with a neighbor's kids, find something to keep your hands - and your heart - busy during these early days.

A girlfriend has invited me over for dinner since John moved into the assisted living community. It just doesn't feel right to go out and enjoy myself without him. Am I doing the right thing?

Socializing alone may make you feel awkward - even guilty at times - but interaction with people is important for your mental well-being. Men, in particular, have trouble seeking out new friends, but the first rule of thumb is to accept any and all invitations extended to you. This is one instance in which friends usually do know what's best. If you and your spouse often socialized with other couples, you might find it awkward or even painful to be included in future couples events. Participate if you want to, but if not, look on this as an opportunity to forge some new friendships.





What are Advance Directives?



Advance directives are documents which permit an adult to convey health care instructions in the event the person subsequently loses the ability to make or communicate decisions.

Although there are some language and provision-related differences between states, the two most common forms of advance directives are the Living Will (LW, or a Directive to Physicians), and the Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care (DPOA).

What is a living will?

A living will communicates health care preferences should an individual ever suffer from a terminal condition and be unable to indicate those preferences for himself. Before a living will can go into effect, not only must the patient's attending physician document both

the terminal diagnosis and the patient's inability to make his own decisions, but a second physician must make an independent assessment of the patient and concur on both the terminal condition and the decisional incapacity. Living wills are used most often to indicate preferences about life-sustaining treatment when death is imminent.

What is a durable power of attorney for health care?

A durable power of attorney is a document in which a person names another individual to make his health care decisions for him, should he ever become incapable of making them himself. Like the living will, the durable power of attorney cannot be invoked unless the patient's attending physician - as well as a second physician or, in some states, an accredited psychologist - documents the patient's decisional incapacity.



What does this mean in terms of self-determination?

The sole purpose of advance directives is to ensure a person's right to make his own decisions regarding his health care options. For example, even after all of the requirements have been met to activate a living will, if the patient regains decisional capacity, even temporarily, his wishes will take precedence over any previously executed advance directive. As the 1990 Patient Self-Determination Act makes clear, the law requires that in the case of an individual's mental incapacitation, his physicians and family are not to make the decision they consider best for the patient, but rather to determine what the patient's own preferences would be and act accordingly. It is important to remember that no one is required to have advance directives.

Furthermore, healthcare providers are required to take a neutral position regarding their merit. In fact, advance directives have advantages and disadvantages. If you are interested in having advance directives for yourself, it may be useful to consult with your physician and a health care attorney to help ensure that your concerns are adequately addressed.



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