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Moving Your Loved One to a Nursing Home: What Can You Do?

All of us fear finding ourselves unable to care for an aging parent. Maybe your father had a severe stroke and now requires 24-hour skilled care or your mother has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and is a danger to herself if left alone. Such situations leave adult children feeling helpless, frustrated, and guilty at their inability to provide the care that their aging parent requires.

There is no question that the decisions surrounding nursing home placement of an aging family member are difficult. Financial arrangements must be addressed, decisions about selling property

and personal possessions must be made, and an affordable facility that provides quality care must be located. Placing an aging parent in a nursing home, however, does not mean the end of his or her life or the end of your relationship with your parent.

Instead of spending valuable energy on feelings of guilt or sadness, use that energy to think of creative ways to let your aging relative know how much you care. When a loved one is adjusting to a new environment, to the loss of personal possessions, and to the challenges of health limitations, it is important to remind him or

her that he or she is still a very cherished part of the family. The following list of ideas may help you with this difficult transition:

- Do not be surprised or distressed if your loved one expresses sadness or even anger during his or her initial transition to a care facility. In some cases the move comes with more confusion than usual. This can be an extremely emotional time when adults are forced to give up much of their independence. When most seniors enter a nursing facility they give up personal property, the freedom to make daily decisions about what they eat and wear, who they live and interact with, as well as companion pets and neighborhood friends. Recognize their grief and allow them to vent their emotions even if it is difficult for you to hear.
- It is common for nursing facilities to suggest that you refrain from visiting your loved one for at least a week after he or she first moves into the new residence. Although this may seem cruel and difficult to accept, consider the suggestion. By visiting every day you may increase the difficulty

your aging parent experiences in adapting to the new relocation. Your parent needs time to meet new people, learn a new routine, and make personal adjustments. If you are too uncomfortable with this arrangement, follow your own instincts, but be sure you are putting the best interests of your loved one first rather than appeasing your own feelings of guilt.

- Consider writing a letter to the staff of the nursing facility describing the personal history (accomplishments, jobs), family information (birthplace or hometown, marriage, number of children), and personality characteristics (likes and dislikes, a nickname) of your loved one. A letter like this can help the staff get to know your parent by providing conversation topics and emphasizing the personal uniqueness of your family member.
- Assist your loved one through this difficult transition by helping to form a sense of closure from the life he or she is leaving behind. Do this by including your parent in decisions being made about

his or her material possessions and other property items. Even if your loved one must be placed in a facility without ever returning to his or her home, bring a box of things for your parent to sort through and let him or her choose items from home (clothes, pictures, plants, memorabilia) to keep.

- If your parent is forced to give up a well-loved pet, do not belittle the importance of this relationship. Recognize the significance of this loss and do your best to place that animal in a loving home. Reassure your

parent with pictures and notes from the new owner that his or her beloved friend will be well taken care of in its new home.

It is important to remember that caring for an aging family member does not end when he or she is placed in a nursing facility. Family members can continue contact through visits, phone calls, and letters to their loved one. There are many ways to express your love and affection to someone who lives in a nursing home. Though it may take commitment, compassion, and a little creativity, it is well worth the effort.

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