



When a Loved One Enters a Home

By Kathy Kinsella

People don't generally want to place a loved one in a home. The decision, in most cases is a traumatic one for both the individual and their families. For whatever reason, though, a decision has been made that a loved one must enter a home. Be prepared for a period of adjustment. No matter how carefully the move may have been planned this is a major change and the person may be upset for a while. It should be easy to understand why, and that it takes time to get over the loss a move involves. Family members frequently have mixed feelings about placement of a relative in a home. They may feel angry that there were no choices but institutional care available to them. They may feel great sadness and grief at having to accept the inevitable. They may experience a sense of relief that a decision has finally been made and, at the same time, guilt for wanting someone else to take over the burden. Guilt is an emotion often associated with such a decision. Feelings of betrayal must be dealt with head on. If it has been decided that a relative needs the kind of attention and services not available to them in their own home then be assured that it is not a matter of "Putting them away" but rather a positive step in response to a clear and immediate need.

Guilt happens even though it may be clear that everything possible has been done and that the last choice was placement. Those who experience guilt are often the ones who should not. Why? Because the person who feels guilty is usually a concerned person who has tried to do all that could be done. It is often the person who does not feel guilt-who just doesn't give a darn- who should be carrying the burden of conscience but doesn't.

Added to this is the guilt relatives and friends apply by comments such as "Oh, I'd never have done that!" or "I hear that place is no good." The elderly person too, may in times of mal-adjustment, add to the guilt and blame the family for the move. "After all I've done for you!" or "All right, if you don't want me, put me away!" It is not unusual for family members to disagree about plans. Some family members may want the person to remain at home while others feel the time has come to enter a home. It is helpful if all family members discuss the problem together. Misunderstandings and disagreements are often worse when everyone does not have all the facts.

Other family members may not visit because they find it hard to face visiting the home, don't know what to talk about when they get there. It is sometimes easier to find reasons not to visit.

Here are some practical things to help someone orient the elderly to his or her new home.

1. Don't let the individual down after they enter the home. The person needs to know they are important and are thought of by friends and relatives.
2. Help the individual learn the daily routines of the home (make a schedule).
3. Show an interest in the home, walk around read the bulletin boards, talk to other residents. Help the individual identify landmarks for getting around.
4. Be sure to know the staff at the home and help the staff understand the needs of the individual.
5. Decorate the individual's room to make it his/her.
6. Take the individual for rides shopping, home for dinner, to church. Even if the individual resists going back to the home after an outing they may eventually come to accept the routine and may benefit from the knowledge they are still part of the community. Occasionally, if it continues to be difficult to get the person to return, it may be better to visit them in the home.
7. Continue to involve the individual in family outings, keep them involved in special family events. Inform of sad events. Don't be overprotective. If the older person is persistently treated in a patronizing manner or if options are removed by others who take control, they can react in 2 ways; resist and fight back or give up.
8. Tell the individual exactly when you'll visit and keep your commitment.
9. Take old photo albums, books and clippings to the individual that might trigger events of the past and encourage them to talk, to reminisce.
10. Take tape recordings of family or children at a distance.
11. Help with self care, a manicure, eat a meal together, or bring a treat you can share.
12. Take children to visit but prepare everyone for the event as a visit may be upsetting. The elderly may be upset until they adjust to a new setting. Remember, depression is not an unusual reaction for any

person who has been removed from his or her normal role as an income earner, housewife, or as an involved citizen. It is not so much an aging problem as it is a human problem.

13. Encourage independence and self esteem. What makes it worthwhile to get up in the morning? For ourselves it may be having something to do (job/hobby), activities that interest us, feeling needed, experiencing adventures, and variety. The aged need it too. Encourage them and enhance the positives. Talking down to an elderly person lowers their self-esteem. Seniors prefer adult to adult communication. Don't close the path to independence by being over solicitous because of a need to nurture or because it is convenient. Catering may be quicker and easier but it can't be considered a kindness when we do for someone something they could or could learn to do for themselves. Focus on abilities rather than disabilities.
14. Try to postpone other activities or changes until after everyone has adjusted to the move.
15. There may be unfinished business to take care of. Involve the individual in the plans as much as possible. He or she is still a person and participation in plans and decisions is important. Discuss the choices that are available and what action you feel are necessary. Tactful honesty will spare a lot of family grief. Don't deceive the individual. Help them express their fears and concerns. People who have been hood winked into a move may become angry and suspicious and their adjustment to the new home may be very difficult.
16. If the individual has complaints, investigate. A complaint may be legitimate or may be trivial, covering up what is really being felt like; fear of the future. A complaint may not necessarily be directed at yourself or the home. It may be a cry for help, a manifestation of inner turmoil. Acknowledge the feelings and help talk them out. Remember, the individual may be kicking up their heels just to let you know they exist. Would you rather your loved one be forever manageable and docile, or independent and spunky?

Older people can and do cope. They have faced some momentous changes in their lifetimes and they had to be hardy to survive it all. The change in Lifestyle means major adjustments. It takes time and energy for staff, residents and family and it can be a painful process. Giving up a familiar routine and setting is very difficult, especially for those who must bear the burden of loss of independence. Moving to a home means giving up a familiar place and familiar possessions. But everyone can learn. It may take longer for some as they may need more time to digest new information. Some people cling to old points of view and resist learning. This behaviour is not necessarily a product of old age. It may have to do more with the individual's personality.

Occasionally a person may never adjust to the move. The person who is warm and considerate through early years will likely be the same in later years and the same may be true of the intolerant, complaintive person. When a problem arises, it is best solved before it becomes a crisis. If your loved one is not getting the care you would like, discuss it with staff. But remember, although geriatric care can be a rewarding task, it is also very physically and emotionally demanding. Staff needs to know relatives appreciate their efforts. Make your voice heard whether it is to complain or praise. Change is difficult. No place will be like "home" and therefore some adjusting and compromises will be necessary. However it can be a time of new beginnings, new friends and new interests.

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