



Top 5 Questions Adult Children Ask About Senior Living

Every year at about this time, I talk to many families who have become concerned about the changes they have noticed in their loved ones over the holidays. They may be shocked by a seemingly rapid decline or they may come to the sudden realization that the changes they have noticed through the years have become too worrisome to ignore.

Sometimes the extent of the issues doesn't become apparent until one person has a medical crisis. Frequently it is the caregiving spouse who has the greatest medical issues because that individual has been quietly stressed for a very long time. If this sounds like one of your patients, clients, or families you are working with, please let them know they are not alone.

As your Healthcare Liaison for A Place for Mom, it's my job to help these families navigate this road. We can be their go-to person. Many times, they just need someone to talk to and a shoulder to cry on. It can be a very overwhelming time.

Here are a few of the questions I often hear from families who are just beginning this complex journey:

1. How do I know when it's time to think about senior care?

If you have any doubts about a particular behavior or you see something that feels like a red flag, it's a good time to reach out for professional help. Even seemingly small things such as urinary tract infections can cause confusion and memory issues. If your loved one is showing behavior or personality changes or if they seem to be covering up memory issues, then a visit to their physician is warranted. Other telling clues including staying in bed, not wanting to get dressed and evidence of recent falls like bruises or cuts.

2. How do I broach the topic of senior care with my loved one?

Having the conversation about senior care can be difficult for everyone involved. Seniors are afraid of losing their independence; of being abandoned or feeling as if they are a non-functioning member of society. Many of them picture senior living as an institutional setting where they will end up spending all day in a wheelchair watching television. This is not what assisted living or independent senior living is about. I often remind people that assisted living helps older people preserve their independence by providing them with the activities and safe environment that minimizes the kind of accidents that often lead to a total loss of independence.

I counsel adult children to be sensitive in their approach, to help their older loved ones overcome the fears they are going through and to clear up any misconceptions about senior care. This is where touring a community can help. Once seniors see for themselves that they aren't being "warehoused," they may become more willing to discuss long-term solutions.

Many adult children become frustrated when their loved ones or parents refuse to accept help or don't understand that they need help. They may think they are managing just fine without it. A lack of awareness of impairment is common in stroke survivors or people who are suffering from dementia. It can be challenging to reason with people who have some cognitive impairment or with people who are very negative or unwilling to compromise in any way.

In cases such as these, I often suggest getting a physician involved. A senior may be more willing to listen to a perceived authority figure or expert than their child.

3. How do I deal with the guilt?

If they have talked about senior living at all, many adult children have promised their parents that they will care for them or that they will never "put them away." They often feel guilty when they realize they can no longer care for their parents because of their advanced dementia, physical disabilities or other circumstances. They may even feel like moving them to senior living means they are breaking their promise to them.

I tell them that their main responsibility is to make sure their parents are being cared for and that their safety is more important than promises they made back in the day. I often use this example: What if you kept your promise and then your dad or mom suffered an injury that could have been prevented? You would feel guiltier than if you had honored their original request to keep them at home.

4. What is senior living really like?

Senior living communities offer seniors that chance to stay active, to enjoy relationships and remain independent in a safe and stimulating environment. Many senior living communities provide restaurant-style dining so residents and their guests feel like they are going out to eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner. They are blown away by the quality of the food and the choices offered.

Every community's goal is to have as active a community as possible. Some communities include billiard rooms, coffee shops, ice cream shops, movie theaters, parlors, pools and pubs. There are also often art classes, exercise classes, book clubs, computer classes and yoga classes offered to residents. Transportation is provided for trips to local attractions, events and restaurants.

The only way to know is to visit a senior living community. Chances are you'll be surprised.

5. How long does it take someone to settle into senior living?

I find that within a month or so of moving to a community most seniors are having so much fun they don't want to leave. I had a recent email from a family that said "Mom is the happiest that I have seen her in probably a decade. She gets out of her room, socializes, laughs and participates in life! This is such a joy to see."

I always tell families that it's better to be proactive than reactive, both with behavioral and health changes and with beginning to consider your options. Better to have the information in your back pocket in case of a sudden change in circumstances. Maybe you're not ready, but start to gather that information, have a file set aside and be prepared. You're helping yourself and you're helping your loved one.