
Realities of moving into an Aged Care Home

Downside

The unfortunate reality for many people, of moving into an aged care facility is that they have already faced many challenges and upheavals in their life before doing so. Usually, a significant decline has occurred in their physical or cognitive health and living independently has become such a struggle. It has come to this point, perhaps their families or partner can no longer adequately support them to continue living independently at their home. They have come directly from hospital to aged care following a bad fall or accident. That has indeed reinforced their lack of capability to remain independent at their home.

Family involvement

Sometimes a family may have encouraged them to move into an aged care on the premise that it is a temporary arrangement. Perhaps the older person just needs some respite from the challenges they face at home. In reality, they may have been hanging onto their independence for some time already with many mishaps occurring with or without the family's knowledge.

It is rarely an easy decision for the family or carer or partner to bring them to aged care. While they have feelings of relief knowing that their loved one will be cared for in all elements of their daily life, the family may also have reluctance and guilt associated with doing so based on what they know about their loved one - that they never ever wanted them to end up there. The family may perceive that this is actually the end of the road; they may die here. Everyone knows that they must die, but the entry through the doors of an aged care facility deems that day closer than they may have previously cared to consider.

The rooms of an aged care facility may resemble that of a hospital, although these days they are well-sized and well-presented; they may have art décor, and even outlook to a garden. The constant noises around the hallways are not the same as they had at home, and staff and nurses are popping in to check on them, clean their room, take their clothes to the laundry, administer their medications, provide meals, and perhaps even feed them. They may receive an invitation to engage in social groups and leisure activities, they face a whole lot of new faces - so many staff, so many residents, families of other residents, volunteers, and those people from all nations, walks of life and backgrounds themselves.

Overwhelming change

The first weeks after moving in, can be quite overwhelming and exhausting. Every element of their life is discussed and documented so they are well supported. They will have nutrition requirements determined, medication, mobility assessment, life story and emotional well-being discussed, religious practices scrutinised and probed, all in the nicest possible way, of course. And that's just the beginning. Not everything runs smoothly when the resident has a different idea of what they want or don't want compared to their family's choice and some expectations not quite matching with the realities.

After a few weeks of living in a new environment, they may realise that this once temporary solution of some respite now becomes their permanent reality. This can be when the penny drops, and their

true feelings are revealed. They may have politely agreed to all of this in the short term but now there is no turning back. The prospect of never returning to the life they once knew and loved can be very confronting. They may become angry, they may display feelings of deep sadness, tears, hopelessness, despair, and have extreme moods. They may be uninspired and lacking the vitality they once felt.

Feelings

The families can now begin to feel some sadness themselves, and sometimes anxiety and guilt over seeing their loved ones in this emotional place. The sale of their home - that can be very final. Some may wish to have one last look through; others may choose not to do so. The pain is too hard. At this time the families may often want to run and hide from the sadness they see in their elderly folk and busy themselves in their own hectic lives so they don't have to see the pain or decline of their loved one.

Many do not know how to face the feelings themselves. Their parents, after all, gave them life and now they feel a responsibility for this choice. If they are also facing the varying stages of dementia, they may already have mourned the loss of their loved one's true person. Their mum or dad, or husband or wife, may become increasingly confused, and agitated. Many social and behavioural changes are occurring. Their relative may become very suspicious and may have total personality changes, not to mention the fact that they may start to not even recognise their nearest and dearest when they visit. So many emotions from the families come to the surface at this time. Frustration, being unappreciated, resentment, loss, grief, guilt, impatience, tiredness and exhaustion. And, even perhaps here, they can be reluctant to express negative feelings for the fear that they will be judged by others – "Who would have thought it would come to this?"

Upside

Despite the many potential downsides of a move, there can be just as many upsides. In a quality aged care facility, the staff are caring and compassionate to the new faces and their families. They offer words of support and reassurance that their loved ones will indeed be in good hands. They come to the home to rest and relax and put their feet up - no more hard work for them. Their working days are done, they can rest easy in the assurance of 24-hour care. Staff are trained in all areas of personalised care for all residents. There is focus on ways to reduce stress. People suffering from memory loss thrive on familiarity - familiar faces, a familiar environment and even familiar food. Routine can help them orientate to their new surroundings. Their mood swings are taken for what they are; there are calm and rational responses by carers all in a day in the life of an aged carer provider, always treating residents with dignity and respect and love. Family and friends and community are strongly encouraged to support them, particularly in the transition period. It is so important for older people that those they love consistently to visit them, call them, keep in touch with them. They can talk through their feelings and issues.

The importance of family and friends

When asked, "What is the most important thing in their life right now?", they always say "family"; always say "friends". Everything else is secondary to these connections. Why? They want to feel loved; this is the way God made us. Studies have shown that having supportive relationships is a strong protection against mental illness and health issues and greatly increases our mental well-being.

During COVID lockdowns and social restrictions, we all understood the benefits of staying connected. Most of us missed seeing our own friends and family. Imagine being in an aged care facility away from all the things you once knew and loved with no connections to your loved ones. Family and friends can be encouraged to take an active role in supporting them in engaging in activities they enjoy, making a date for the next visit. They can look forward to that gardening, a visit with a coffee and a chat - chats via Skype on the iPad. When you are at a distance away from family and friends, the community plays such an important role in aged care living support. When this happens, residents feel loved and supported and emotional support can play the biggest part of the transition.

Our caring role

We need to love and nurture our elderly. We can read to them, reminisce on their days, look at photos with them, listen to music together, sing together, pray together, hold hands, laughing and sharing your own life stories. If we cannot visit, we can often send letters of love, and cards to remind them that they are loved and appreciated for who they are and what they contributed to your life. It was their words of wisdom that inspired you to greater heights.

With this support from their loved ones and community, they can begin to see the upside of this new home. They can see that they do not have to worry about the mundane chores of making a meal or making the bed or doing the washing. They do not have to worry about getting their medications or going to appointments as all this is done for them. They can have their independence should they choose - to work in the garden, they can read books all day long. They can watch their favourite TV shows and they can go to any activity of their choice. They can socialise when they choose; all their preferences are considered, "You don't like fish? You would just like a sandwich for lunch, not a hot meal? No problems!" "You can have your privacy. You'd like to attend Bible reading groups? We will come and ask you each morning and support you there." Suddenly, life does not seem too bad after all in a loving home where the staff and community volunteers care so much about you. Residents will be more than happy to make the move when the time comes, should Jesus have not yet brought us God's promised new order.

COVID-19 and other traumas - positives

During the period of full lock-down, co-workers and residents had described a sense of calm had come as many people went through the hallways. Staff and residents only saw those who loved and worked in their wings. So, yes, it was isolating. That was the intention - to minimise risk of infection, but with that came small community groups and this created a calm, united atmosphere. Some residents became very close to others through this period. They had no family or friends or volunteers around them, just perhaps the occasional contact via phone or Skype. Those who usually preferred to stay mostly in the rooms now ventured out for the smaller group activities. When something was on that they may previously have declined to be involved in, they now decided to come along. Perhaps it was because it was these small and more intimate groups. Perhaps it was that they needed to feel the support and company of others. They had been aware of the fact that the outside world was in turmoil - many were very aware of this from their TVs. So, we saw some who usually preferred to be more private come out into the communal spaces more often to chat and interact with others. Then once the family environment and volunteers could start to revisit, they savoured it and started coming to all the activities - they no longer took them for granted. We found that some residents had even

become more connected to God and wanting to be more involved in spiritual activities. Now, for example, others started coming to daily Bible reading group and the memorial meetings, believing it is closer than ever to Jesus's return.

Order and structure

I believe that elderly people often prefer order and structure in their daily lives with living independently or living in aged care hostel. When you invite them along to something that is on a program, there are those who have already perused the daily program for what's on - where and when. Having a routine in a program to go to means that they could predict and plan their day. This might make them feel safe and stable. Knowing the date and time is often very important to our residents. Without a clock on the wall many feel lost or worried. We might say, "What does it matter what time bowling is on? They more than likely do not have much else on their schedule. Surely, they can just come along?" This daily routine can help them feel more in control of everything and help them to make room for things that are important, and routine can aid mental health. It can help them to cope with change and to form healthy habits and to reduce their stress levels.

I would just like to finish with a few quotes.

Isaiah 41: 10. "I am with you. Be not dismayed, for I am your God, I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Psalm 4:8 "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety".

And, 2 Thessalonians 3:16 "Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all".

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