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Moving a Relative with Memory Loss

Take Steps Now to Make Moving Day Easier for Everyone

by Beth Spencer, M.A., M.S.W. and Laurie White, M.S.W.

Over the years, a number of family members have told us that the day they moved their relative with dementia to residential care was one of the worst days of their lives. That is a very powerful statement and one that concerned us enough to write down some of our ideas about making the process of moving a little easier.

Why is the decision to move so difficult? There are as many different reasons as there are caregivers. Some of the most common include: promises that were made ("I'll never put you in a nursing home"), the negative media depictions of long-term care, and the impossible struggles some families face in trying to provide 24-hour care at home. Whatever the reason, it is rarely an easy decision or process.

One of the first suggestions to families is to plan ahead, if at all possible. Look around – find out what is available, what the move-in and move-out criteria are, what your family can afford, and what places feel acceptable to you. Even though you may not ever move your relative, it is helpful to have a back-up plan. We have known many families who had planned to care for their relative at home, but because of health emergencies or changes in the person due to dementia, it suddenly became necessary to move the person.

Because moving can be such an overwhelming process, we suggest that



families divide it into phases: before, during and after the move. Before the move, it is important to think about whether or how to take your relative with memory loss to visit. Is he or she someone who can still be involved in the decision process? What are the pros and cons of visiting with the person? With earlier diagnoses in recent years, more people in the early stages of dementia are involved in choosing their future living quarters.

Another difficult issue for families is how to talk to their relative with memory loss about the move. There is no single answer to this. It depends on you, your relative, and your relationship. But we do believe it is impor-

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Moving a Relative

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tant to prepare the person for an upcoming move, even if it has to be done repeatedly because of memory loss. There are many things to consider here: when the best time to tell your relative is, who should be involved in the discussion, what you are going to say, how to respond to his or her feelings.

John was nervous about telling his mother they had reserved a room for her at the Alzheimer's unit. He didn't know what to say. He practiced what he was going to say with his cousin and felt more prepared and confident when the time came to tell her.

No one in Sue's family wanted to talk to her about moving. They asked Dr. Jones to get them started and then they were able to talk to her openly. When Sue would ask "Why do I have to move?" her family would say, "It was Dr. Jones' recommendation."

Moving day can be extremely difficult, although some residential care facilities make every effort to help families feel comfortable. We suggest that family members think ahead about the move-in process and about who can go with you to make the day a little easier. Families are often very sad and exhausted at the end of this day. It is helpful to plan what you will do after you have left your relative on that first day.

Getting used to the world of long-term care – whether a nursing home, assisted living facility or adult foster care home – takes time for families as well as the person with dementia. It is important to recognize the many complex feelings that arise after a move. There is a grieving



process for both you and your relative, as well as many other emotions that may surface.

You are still a caregiver after your relative has moved. Your role will change, but you are still critically important. As a family member, you must learn your way around the new world of residential care, and you must be an advocate for your relative. Building relationships with staff will be important, as well as finding roles for yourself within this new world. Although no one can predict the course of your relative's illness, planning for a move can help bring a little more predictability into an unpredictable situation.

Contact the Alzheimer's Association for a directory of residential care facilities in your area, as well as a checklist of questions to ask and things to look for as you consider a move. See page 2 for an abbreviated checklist.

Beth Spencer and Laurie White owned a counseling and care management business in Michigan called Caregiver Connections for a number of years. Currently, Beth teaches gerontology at Madonna University in Livonia, and Laurie lives in California where she works for Summerville Assisted Living.

Resources

"Moving a Relative with Memory Loss: A Family Caregiver's Guide," Laurie White and Beth Spencer, 2001. A practical guide to help families through each phase of the moving process. \$11

"Residential Care: A Guide for Choosing a New Home," Alzheimer's Association, 1998. \$1

"A Better Life: Helping Family Members, Volunteers, and Staff Improve the Quality of Life for Residents Suffering from Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders," Coons et al, 1986. Call for a complimentary copy!

To obtain these and other resources, contact the chapter office at 734.677.3081 or 800.337.3827.