

A smooth move: Great ways to help an older adult downsize



By Vicki Riley Keyes

When it's time for an older adult to downsize and move, how do you, as a caring family member or friend, help them with as little stress as possible? Following are 10 tips.

Remember, they are still in charge.

This is their move, not yours! You naturally want to organize it all for them. For the majority of seniors though, it is very important to let them know that they are making the decisions, not you. When I work with a family, I always defer to the person who is moving; even though they might not give me the answer, they still know that they can make the decisions.

Concentrate on the big picture.

Sometimes, confusion can arise between siblings over who is responsible for disposing of items or which sibling is getting certain items from the parent. When working with siblings, communicate regularly so that all family members are kept in the loop. Also, moving will be made easier if one family member organizes all the jobs that have to be done.

Get comfortable with the new residence.

Once a new home has been selected, visit it before your parent moves in. Then, bring

them for several visits, and get the staff to introduce them to a few of the residents. Stay and have lunch and mingle. It all helps to get a senior more comfortable with the prospect of moving.

Prepare for the move.

Start with the floor plan of where they are moving to, and look at where they are spending most of their time in their current home. Is it the kitchen, the den, or the basement? What are their daily habits? Do they eat breakfast at a table or on a tray watching the TV? Moving from a large home into a space of around 550-square-feet will take some planning.

Let the senior decorate.

Adult children tend to want to “decorate” the new home to make it look nice, but what is important here is familiarity and routine. Most of the clients I work with know exactly where everything is placed and want the same in their new home.

Whenever possible, mirror the exact same environment and routines in their new home as their old. It may mean bringing a large, old ugly chair, but if that's what they sit in every day, bring it. Also, take photographs of curio cabinets and bookshelves to ensure that items are placed back in the right place.

“I feel as young as I ever did, apart from the occasional heart attack.”

Robert Benchley



“Veterans will have saved wartime memorabilia and may want to talk about their experiences. My husband was given all of his uncle’s medals and uniforms as a gift.”

Monica



“Books and albums are lovely to keep and often have special memories. I still have hard cover story books that my grandfather gave my father when he was a boy.”

Caroline



“When my grandmother moved, she gave each one of her grandchildren one or two of her lovely tea cups, most of which had been presents over the years.”

Ashleigh

Take time to sort and pack.

Focus on sorting, not packing. Let the senior say goodbye to their possessions. It is one of the most important and rewarding things you can do. Try and schedule sorting sessions to an hour at a time. It is tiring, both physically and emotionally, to sort through possessions, and it is so important to let them take their time with each item. For example, during a recent sorting session with a client, the gentleman and I walked into his study where he showed me a photo of a Lancaster bomber and its crew. He said, “on this day 60 years ago, I flew my first bombing raid into Germany.” It was important for him to share his experience, his life, and his youth and then move on.

Your parent’s priorities differ from yours.

Remember, the senior adult is in charge and their priorities are different to yours. If books were special to them, they will want to know what will happen to the books that are not going with them. Trying to rush them through this process will only frustrate you both. Proceed in a sequence that addresses their priorities, not yours!

Accept their gifts.

Please accept their gifts, no matter how full your home may be. Knowing that passing

something on to a family member or friend is very satisfying and comforting. Your parents came from a post-war generation; they looked after their money, spent wisely and worked hard. A good piece of furniture bought from Eaton’s 40 years ago still has value. Whenever possible, accept it with appreciation.

Be realistic.

Be realistic about how much time you can devote to the project. Allow at least 40 to 60 hours, and if possible, spread the time out for the sorting process. If your time is limited, use it to help your parents prepare for their move.

Delegate.

As with most jobs, delegation is the secret to getting the job done and staying sane during your parents’ move. If the job is too much for you to handle, consider hiring a moving professional to help either with part of the move or with the entire move. Delegating responsibility will save you your time and your sanity. ●

Vicky Riley Keyes is the owner of Red Coats Moving Solutions, a company specializing in senior move management. Visit www.redcoatsmoving.com.



Agreeing on roles

So what is a caring family of an older, frail, vulnerable person to do? First of all, the family must agree that they will take on the roles of advocacy and support. They must become knowledgeable and question the health care staff without being aggressive and constantly doubtful or hostile. Although the Internet can be a powerful learning tool, not everything on it is reliable. Coming in every day to meet the doctor with the latest print-out—which appears to counter everything they have told you—may not be the most effective way to achieve your goals.

The challenge is to demonstrate to health care providers that you do really care about their patient. Being there will demonstrate your caring but is not always possible in today's work world. Rotating a number of family members can help. Sometimes,

having a personal companion that has been previously involved in care can be an asset as long as that person is not perceived as a “spy” who reports negatively on the activities of the health care providers.

The family must agree that they will take on the roles of advocacy and support.

Have a frank discussion with those providing the care, stating your hope that they can understand that your involvement is part of a therapeutic alliance. If there is something you do not understand, ask for an explanation and expect to receive one that makes sense. If the explanation doesn't make sense, ask for more in-depth information. If necessary, ask where you can look it up to understand it better.

Acknowledging care

Being a family advocate may be the key to the good outcome that you are hoping for. Nonetheless, it must be done with an amiable manner, good humour and expressions of acknowledgement and gratitude when things have been done well.

At the end of the clinical experience, the goal should be the best medical outcome possible. It should also end with a positive recollection of those who cared for your loved one even if the illness and its course were challenging, frightening or even ended in a manner other than what you would have hoped for. At the least, you should be able to say, “They really cared, and they really tried.”

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Improve your exercise habits

By Dr. Elaine Dembe



Sometimes the toughest part of a workout is getting dressed; that is, making the decision to exercise. I know someone who goes to bed and sleeps wearing her fitness gear (minus the running shoes, of course) so she won't talk herself out of it in the morning. Whatever it takes! Just do it. Here are some other strategies that may help.

Develop a regular routine of exercise at the same time each day. Morning exercisers tend to stick with their fitness programs more easily; by setting aside time first thing in the morning, they guarantee that little can come between them and their workouts. When patients tell me they're tired all the time, I advise, "Get up 20 minutes earlier and take a brisk walk before breakfast." Inevitably, those who try it say they feel great and have much more energy.

Find friends who exercise and join them. Socializing makes fitness fun, and fit friends motivate each other to stay on course. Instead of doing lunch, why not walk and talk at the same time? Breakfast meetings with active-minded clients could be held on a squash or tennis court.

Make an appointment with yourself. Write "exercise" in your daily planner to acknowledge a commitment to yourself.

Join the Y or any other reputable fitness club. Paying for a membership in a health club often motivates you to go.

Hang shoes or equipment on the doorknob. When you're just beginning a fitness program, you may need an extra push. Seeing your equipment on the door will remind you to use it.

Set out your goal in writing. Specify the type of activity, frequency and duration. Fitness levels improve through regular, consistent workouts. If your goal is to run your first five-mile race by the end of the summer, and in April you're barely covering one mile regularly, writing out your goal will commit you to getting there.

If you can't run or walk because of inclement weather, swim or ski instead. Be flexible in your choice of activities. Go to a club or community centre with a pool or weight-training facilities.

Reward yourself whenever you reach one of your goals. New clothes in a smaller size or a fitness-oriented vacation, such as a trip to a health spa, would be a suitable reward to help you maintain your program.

Get involved in leisure activities with

physical content such as hiking or gardening. If you have an aversion to exercise, develop an active lifestyle. Try Ping-Pong, horseback riding, dancing or biking. Get active any way you can.

Keep a fitness journal. As you record your experiences, you'll be able to see yourself progress. Initially you might write, "Had to stop after two minutes of jogging" or "Out of breath, legs tired." Further on in your journal you'll be saying, "Felt good" and "Ran four minutes without stopping, increased energy afterwards." Rereading your entries is terrific motivation.

Have a periodic treadmill test for fitness assessment. This can be done at a health club or Y. A fitness test is a benchmark so you can see how much you've improved.

Proudly proclaim your fitness intentions. By announcing your intentions publicly, you'll be more likely to stick with your program. Make fitness a family affair—get everyone involved in an active lifestyle. Pack a lunch and go on a nature hike. ●

Elaine Dembe is an author, public speaker and chiropractor who practises in Toronto, ON.

"A person's physical condition is best judged by what he takes two of at a time—stairs or pills."

Anonymous