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The Conversation



Have you personally experienced a big change where you were questioning “What if this is not the right thing?” “What if it goes wrong?” “Why does this have to happen now?” If so, it probably caused a great deal of anxiety in direct proportion to how much control you had over the situation and the outcome. I’ve recently experienced watching this as my 84 year-old parents prepare for their transition to an assisted living facility. Given the impact moving to assisted living can have on your health, finances, relationships and community, it’s no wonder it’s such a difficult decision to make.

My parents’ journey to this major point in life was not quick and we never had what many articles on this subject describe as “the conversation”. In fact, we have been talking about this day for years. What started as a conversation turned into a four year dialogue and process of decision-making. It was initiated by the things that you typically read about when discussing later in life issues. “So, when are you thinking of moving to that retirement home?” “What would happen if you forgot to take your pills?” There are many articles that try to tell you when it’s time, including signs to look for such as bills not being paid on time, home deterioration and dishes left untouched for days or weeks. While these are valuable road signs, they have not shown up in my parents’ life yet, and I’ve realized they may not provide the real motivation to act.

For my parents, the decision to make the move has come down to two key factors. The first

was the fact that eventually something was going to happen that might force them to move, such as my father falling and breaking a hip. We didn't know when that something might happen, but my parents did know that making the transition before an event would be a lot easier than after, as more choices and decisions would be made on their terms. The second factor was the possibility that only one of them would be making the transition — *alone*. In fairness to demographics, that would probably be my mother.

Years ago my parents made a deposit at an assisted living facility near their home, never really certain they would need to move there. They felt it was a wise decision to at least get on the waiting list. By the time they finally were ready to inquire, my parents had been on the top of the list for years! Now ready to move, my parents have chosen a different place. Yet they've stayed in control of their decision, and although it's a major one and it produces stress, they are not as anxious as they could have been had they waited too long. My parents have taken advantage of options and time, and in hindsight, that has served them and our family well.

As I reflect on this process for our family, and why it's been a positive experience for my parents, my siblings and me, the main advice my family would give is to: 1) start the dialogue early; 2) make the change as a couple (if applicable) while you can; 3) make the change while it's easier to cope with; 4) take small steps and keep moving forward; and 5) don't wait until family has to get involved, as they'll tend to help longer and harder than they should, leading to stress on the younger generation. The richness of having a dialogue and process only confirmed how blessed we are as a family. Not everyone gets to watch their parents move through this part of their lives. Not every couple is given the chance to do it together. However, each of us can be an encouragement to those who are one phase ahead in life, or to those who are watching from a generation behind.

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