

# 5 TIPS for caregivers

## CHOOSING A CARE FACILITY

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There are many hard choices in life. Where should I live? Which job should I take? And the ultimate hard choice – what should I have for dinner? But what makes these choices so hard is that there isn't one right answer! There are many great places to live, numerous fulfilling vocations, and yes, either chicken or fish would be perfectly acceptable for dinner. Choosing a facility is the same type of hard decision, with many hard questions attached. When is the right time? Will my loved one adjust? And can I even afford it? Here are some tips to help you make a good decision about choosing a long-term care facility.

### 1 Evaluate your loved one.

If you're even considering the possibility of a residential care facility, this step might seem like a no-brainer. Of course I'm evaluating my loved one! But remember, one of the first questions you'll have to encounter in your search for a facility, is how much care your loved one really needs. Take an honest look at how many activities of daily living they need help with (such as eating, toileting, personal hygiene, dressing, etc.). Does the person have additional medical conditions that need attention (more than just giving a pill once a day)? And how quickly is the person declining? Is the help that you're providing sustainable for another year or two, or maybe just a month? Keep in mind the person's communication skills as well. Many don't consider how the person will adapt and make friends in their new environment. If your loved one can still communicate and function socially, they will be better able to connect with other residents and staff, increasing their own happiness in the facility, while also gaining more positive attention from staff who are able to get to know them.

### 2 Evaluate yourself.

The step that's often overlooked is how the care is affecting you, the caregiver. Again, take an honest look at the situation, and be aware of activities you may have already given up in order to take care of your loved one. Ask yourself, are you as active outside of the home as you were previously? How frequently do you feel fatigued? When is the last time you were sick, and did you recover as quickly as usual?

If you called a family member or friend for help, are they able to? Are your expectations (actually) realistic? Once you take a look at your situation, talk to a friend or relative you trust, and ask for their honest opinion as well. You may have forgotten how many obligations you had to drop, plans you had to cancel, and how many times you've actually been sick. As one caregiver put it, "The decision is a matter of balance between

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your loved one's needs and abilities and your own. There is no precisely right time and no perfectly right place. It is an agonizing decision; get all the help you can." This is important advice to remember: (1) your needs are important, and (2) there is no exact right decision!

### 3 Do your homework.

Even if there is no right decision, you can certainly do your homework to make sure it's a good decision. Once you've evaluated the needs of yourself and your loved one, this will allow you narrow the list of facilities that might be appropriate (e.g. if your loved one has dementia, is the

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facility equipped to handle this?). Geographic range is another good place to start narrowing your choices as well. If you plan to visit regularly, how far is too far for a daily drive? Or if you're only able to visit on weekends, is a little further acceptable for weekly trips? Once you have a list of possible facilities, arm yourself with questions. There are many resources online with questions to ask – print out a list (or combine and make your own!), so that you'll have the questions in front of you when you visit. Leave some space to take notes while you're there too, so you can keep everything straight if you're visiting several options. Take a friend with you too, if possible, for an extra set of eyes and ears. They can be checking out the décor and cleanliness while you get your questions answered. Try to visit your top choices when they have a party or special event. This will allow you to talk with other families there, and see how their experience has been too. Rank your options, and don't be lured into a quick decision by discounts for signing up right away. This is a big decision not to be rushed; any discount received will go out the window if you end up having to move your loved one again down the road.

### 4 Get your ducks in a row.

While you're doing your homework on the facilities in your area, you'll also need to do your homework on your own legal and financial situation. Legal documents, such as Powers of Attorney, and Advance Medical Directives will be helpful to have in place to give a facility initially. But more importantly for choosing the facility, you'll need to know what you can afford. How will you be paying the cost? Is there a long-term care insurance plan? Does the facility accept Medicare or Medicaid benefits? Are you paying out of pocket? Figure out how long your budget can reasonably sustain the cost of the facility placement. And ask the facility what

would happen if the funds run out. Are there are likely to be fee increases, either general or for additional care needs, that would make these funds run out sooner? These are all details that you don't have to ask every facility on your first visit, but as you've narrowed your options, you do want to ensure that there is a reasonable plan in place for paying for care, and you have all of your ducks in a row.

### 5 Avoid a crisis (if possible!).

Naturally, if we knew a crisis was coming, we would make plans to avoid it. But that's just the trouble – the very essence of a crisis is that you never know when it's coming! However, if your loved one has advancing dementia, you need to prepare yourself for when, not if the crisis will occur, and early planning can help minimize the problems. Even if it seems early, start to research facilities in your area. Visit a few to gather your initial impressions. You don't want to have to choose a facility in a hurry; a stroke, fall or sudden illness forces you to do your homework quickly, or sometimes not at all if a person is placed in rehab after a hospital stay. However, if you already have a facility preference, you can make this decision more comfortably if it becomes crisis driven. Again, there may not be the absolute right decision, but you can take steps to ensure you make a good decision when the time comes.



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