



Assisted Living:

More and More Folks Call it 'Home Sweet Home'

WRITTEN BY PAT OLSEN

Attempting to move her 70-year-old mother to a residence for individuals with Alzheimer's disease has been one of the most frustrating tasks Kris Appel said she has ever faced. Appel has found a facility near her Baltimore home that she knows her mom can afford because the two met with her mother's financial advisor some months ago. Unfortunately, her mother can't remember that conversation, and her mental faculties are worsening. As difficult as it is, Appel is determined to accomplish the move in the next few months.

"You really have to separate your intellectual side and your emotional side," she said. "When I'm trying to make plans for my mother, I don't allow myself to think about how heartbreaking it is."

Appel's feelings are far from unique. Audrey Chun, M.D., an assistant professor and the director of the Martha Stewart Center for Living at The Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, agrees that the decision to relocate a family member into a long-term care facility is a difficult one. But, she said, the good news is that it's easier now than in the past because of the variety of assisted living facilities available.

Roxanne Smith, director of the Life Guidance memory care unit at Atria Tinton Falls, an assisted living residence in Tinton Falls, NJ, also has words of reassurance for family caregivers, noting: "Your family member can still have a life. We can give them a life. And once they settle in, you may decide it's one of the best decisions you ever made."

Across the United States, assisted living, a long-term care option that includes independent living and varying degrees of assistance with everyday activities, is the fastest growing residential option for the aging population—with about 650,000 people currently at

Choosing an Assisted Living Facility

more than 36,000 facilities nationwide. Assisted living administrators estimate that occupants are 66 to 94 years old and about one-third of them have dementia, although not all of them have been diagnosed.

No doubt, it's a big move to have a loved one enter an assisted living residence. It helps if this topic had been discussed, if possible, with the individual with dementia when he or she had the cognitive ability to have input so that the person's desires regarding long-term care could be taken into consideration.

To ease the process, the first step for families when considering this change is to become educated as much as possible about what's involved, everything from the cost to criteria for choosing the best facility.

Early preparation is key, experts say. Families don't always start investigating alternative living arrangements for their loved ones until the decision is hanging over their heads, said Clare Shanley, executive director of The 80th Street Residence in New York City. This can be problematic since people who need assisted living and other long-term care nowadays are typically released from the hospital earlier than they had been in the past.

"As baby boomers and their families are aging, they're learning that they need to educate themselves about the options earlier," she said.

Since Alzheimer's disease is a progressive illness, one might think it would be readily apparent when an individual needs the type of care an assisted living facility can provide. Unless there is a crisis, however, it might not be so clear: family members may feel guilty about the decision, may be in denial about the person's worsening condition, or are unsure because, as long-distance caregivers, they are hearing about their loved one's state secondhand.

But there are certain markers that can indicate it's time to consider whether someone with dementia might be better served outside the home. Chun noted that both cognitive and functional impairment—memory loss and the inability to perform daily tasks—are indicators.

"When a person starts losing the ability to stay at home safely and needs additional supervision, or needs additional help in other areas, that's when you've got to start thinking about assisted living," she said.

Here are some signs it may be time:

- Suffering health needs. Your loved one is forgetting to take medication or needs more medical attention than can be provided at home.
- Ignoring personal hygiene. The individual's personal hygiene routines, such as bathing or brushing hair, are being overlooked or he or she is incapable of performing them without help.

Experts suggest observing and asking about:

...the financial/provider agreement

Is the facility regulated or licensed?
(Requirements vary by state.)

Are any beds Medicaid certified?

Is the pricing easy to understand?

What services cost extra?

In what situations is a resident transferred or discharged?

What are the facility's rules?

If your loved one is transferred, is the unused portion of the rent refunded?

...the facility itself

Is there a special dementia care unit?

Are medical services, therapists and a pharmacy on-site?

Is staff interacting with residents?

Is it clean, well-organized and free of odor?

Is there a 24-hour response team?

Are there precautions against wandering?

Does the bathroom have safety bars?

Is the facility well-lit?

...social and other programs

Are there activities to keep residents engaged and happy?

Are there individualized programs?

Do residents at different levels come together for certain activities?

Are pets allowed?

...personal/overall care

Is the family involved in the care plan?

How are medications managed?

What assistance with activities of daily living (e.g., with dressing) is available?

What is the staff turnover?

Does the staff have training in dementia?

Are special dietary needs accommodated?

Is transportation provided to grocery stores, religious services and doctors' offices?

This list is by no means exhaustive. When making a final choice, trust your feelings, talk to residents and their families, and do your research.

- **Faltering finances.** Perhaps your loved one is having difficulty using a checkbook, is not paying bills or has been the victim of a scam. Another example is overbuying because the person doesn't remember what items have already been purchased.
- **Limited socialization.** Current opportunities for socialization are limited due to, for example, lack of adult day services, transportation challenges or minimal family interactions.
- **Safety concerns.** Your loved one may be forgetting to shut off the water or the stove, or tends to wander.

In addition, the time might be right because of circumstances surrounding the primary caregiver; the caregiver is emotionally and physically tapped out or can not handle increased responsibilities as the disease has progressed.

It's natural to feel guilty about this difficult decision, experts say. But as WellSpan Health, a community health system in Pennsylvania and Maryland, counsels its clients: "Sometimes care at home is appropriate. Sometimes an environment with 24-hour skilled nursing services is necessary. Part of being a responsible caregiver is understanding that difference and making the right choice," said Barry Sparks, a WellSpan spokesperson. These choices are at either end of the range of care, and assisted living falls somewhere in the middle.

Smith of Atria Tinton Falls advises that even if one person is the main caregiver, other relatives should be involved in the decision, if family dynamics allow.

"You won't feel as guilty, and you can make better choices by brainstorming," she said.

In addition, an eldercare consultant can assist families with choosing a facility for a loved one who is far away.

If a crisis such as a fall or the death of a person's caregiver triggers the decision, families may have an added level of stress. In 2007, Bobby Kolin of New York found himself in an emergency situation when his mother, Rita, was left without a caregiver after his father died unexpectedly. Kolin and his wife couldn't take his mother into their home because they both work and felt they couldn't provide the appropriate care and stimulation.

Scrambling to find a place for his mother, Kolin looked at two facilities, one on the east side of Manhattan and one on the west side, before selecting The 80th Street Residence, an assisted living residence specializing in memory care that had been suggested by a friend who is a social worker. It's near his home on the east side—a big selling point—so he can easily see his mother several times a week.

Besides the closer proximity of the residence, he and his wife especially liked the wealth of programs it offers. The facility offers trips to local museums, a private dining room for family get-togethers, and three concerts a week, for instance. His mother was an accomplished pianist at one time, and has begun playing again in her new home.

As Kolin experienced, the number of facilities and varying levels of personal assistance, medical care and programs and support services each offers can easily make the decision seem overwhelming.

Sunrise Senior Living, which operates 440 senior living communities, is an example of a company that offers various service levels within assisted living facilities for those with memory loss. Sunrise's Terrace Club is for people in the early stages of memory loss, its Reminiscence Neighborhood is

for residents with mild or more advanced dementia, and Edna's Place is for residents with higher needs due to late stage Alzheimer's disease.

While what's good for one family may not be for another, many assisted living communities help prospective clients decide whether their residence is the right fit.

John Donadio, executive director of Atria Tinton Falls, suggests conducting a thorough inspection.

"When you visit, look up, look down, look sideways. If the community is well cared for, it's probably a good indication that your loved one will be well cared for," he said.

In addition, Donadio said, families should pay particular attention to how the staff interacts with the residents.

"I encourage the staff to have fun while they work, but to also remember that this is a place of business as well as the residents' home," he said.

Smith tells people not to choose the first place they visit, and if they feel like there's a tie, to choose the facility in the most convenient area for the family.

Points

\$2,968 is the average monthly base rate for assisted living.

\$1,110 is the average additional monthly cost for dementia care services.

59 percent of assisted living facilities provide dementia care.

According to the MetLife Mature Market Institute, 2007

“I might also tell families they might not need a higher level of care—let’s try this level first,” she said.

Financial considerations also come into play when making a selection. Most assisted living facilities are private pay. In Kolin’s case, he said his father’s estate will pay for his mother’s care for several years. Other individuals tap into their investments, sell their homes or use benefits from long-term care insurance policies. For qualified veterans on pensions, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs’ “Aid and Attendance” program helps defray living costs.

To ease the transition, a good facility will help make the individual’s move, and the family’s response, as anxiety-free as possible. Ideally, a facility approaches each resident as an individual and strives to meet his or her specific needs.

Noted Rita Altman, national director of memory care services at Sunrise Senior Living: “You want your loved ones to be entering a home-like setting that has a familiar feel and gives them the opportunity to still find meaning in life and purpose in everyday activities.”

PAT OLSEN is a New Jersey-based freelance writer who specializes in business, health, education and general interest subjects. She is a regular contributor to *The New York Times*.

Sources to Help Find the Right Fit

A Place for Mom	877.666.3239 www.aplaceformom.com
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Agis Network	866.511.9186 www.agis.com
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Alzheimer’s Foundation of America Excellence in Care Program	866.232.8484 www.excellenceincare.org
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Assisted Living Federation of America	703.894.1805 www.alfa.org
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Eldercare Locator	800.677.1116 www.eldercare.gov
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SeniorDecision	www.seniordecision.com
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