

### CONSIDERING SENIOR HOUSING OPTIONS WITH OLDER RELATIVES? TIPS FOR HAVING AN OPEN CONVERSATION.



Broaching the subject of moving to senior housing with a parent, aunt, uncle or any older adult can conjure up a multitude of feelings and reactions on everyone's part. For some older adults, moving to senior housing might be a relief, a welcome change, peace of mind for not having to worry about the care of a house, and to have many neighbors with whom to dine and socialize. For others it elicits anger or frustration. Americans say they want to stay in their homes for as long as they can--we all know this. The question is what to do about it when you believe that the older adult in your life would be better off in senior housing. How do you have the conversation (actually multiple conversations) so that everyone's feelings and experiences are honored and valued?

With many years of experience, staff at JCHE understands what is involved: not just with the physical move, but also with all of the emotions that go along with it. Since every family dynamic is different, one method will not fit every relationship and situation. Although the conversations are necessary, they probably won't be easy. We offer these tips and techniques as a guide.

#### GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

- Have open, honest and frequent communication.
- Remember that the older adult has had many years of decision-making experience and the right to make his or her own choices. Intellectually you know this, but if you have the goal of moving in mind, it is easy to get impatient and push too hard, too fast.
- The expression "old age is not for sissies" is based on the many harsh realities of growing older. Imagine what it is like for the older adult to go through this experience, especially if she or he has suffered other losses.

*"Help the older adult realize that a move to senior housing is helping to keep him or her independent. It's a triumph, not a failure."*



## CONSIDERATIONS IN RAISING THE IDEA OF MOVING TO SENIOR HOUSING:

- Making a move to any type of senior housing is an open declaration that the older adult is aging; that can be a painful realization for everyone.
- Realize that moving is physically and emotionally overwhelming. Reassure the older adult that you, and/or someone she or he trusts will be there to offer assistance throughout the process.
- Moving earlier rather than later can allow the older adult to maximize the opportunities for making new friends, participate in programs and activities, and take advantage of all that the new environment offers—and be well settled when/if limitations develop.

## ENGAGING IN CONVERSATION:

- Have the conversation(s) in a quiet and calm environment. Face the older adult so that there is true communication with each other. If several people are participating in the conversation, make sure that the older adult is seated in a central place rather than off to the side. Do not talk “about” or “at”; talk “with” her or him.
- View the process as educating one another about your perspectives.
- Remain open and calm. Talk in a matter-of-fact manner. You may need to speak in simple sentences and ideas if the older adult has cognitive impairment. Even if she or he is impaired, she or he can still participate in the decision making process to some degree.
- Listen... carefully. Don't interrupt or try to fill in. A period of silence may mean the older adult is thinking through the conversation and how to reply. Listening goes both ways - try to determine if the person is hearing what you say.
- Respect the opinions of the older adult. Listen to all sides, and if possible, try to make decisions together.
- Even if the older adult doesn't have a realistic idea of their abilities or limitations, ask her or him what you can do to help with tasks. Test the waters by giving suggestions on how to handle an issue like bill paying and respond to their reaction. For example, offer to share tasks: “I'll write out the bills and you review to make sure I've gotten it right”, or “Let's write out the bills together” rather than “I'll take care of the paying the bills from now on”. Permission from the older adult for you to handle matters may evolve over time.
- Judge how the conversation is going and take breaks. Come back to it later or another day. Try taking deep breaths. Seriously.
- If it suits you or the older adult, talk the potential move over with a spiritual advisor or a counselor. A third party may have a more objective view and be able to assist the parties to understand each other better and maybe reach agreement.

## BUILDING THE CASE FOR A MOVE TO SENIOR HOUSING:

- Help the older adult realize that a move to senior housing is helping to keep him or her independent. It's a triumph, not a failure.
- Take advantage of household problems when they arise (electrical, plumbing, or snow shoveling) to broach the subject. If he/she relies on you for these, gently discuss how that is difficult for you to sustain—or how you would prefer your role to be more enriching. If the older adult already has help in the home, it's a good time to raise the issue when they notice problems or absences.
- Senior housing can enable an older adult to spend time on meaningful pursuits, old hobbies or new interests. Rather than attending to or worrying about chores (cleaning the house or apartment, getting someone to shovel the driveway, repairing the leaks, upgrading the electrical service, etc.), he or she can pursue photography, art, politics, tutoring children, or whatever may strike a positive chord, help the older adult think about the future in the new setting, focus on the future more than the past.
- When a younger relative or friend is in the role of caregiver, the time it takes to get the chores done or arrange for services is the time that could be spent with the older adult in a shared meaningful pursuit. Point out that many chores or services can be taken care of by the housing staff, allowing your time to be spent going out for dinner, going to the theater, enjoying a movie, watching a baseball game.

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More than likely this is a topic that will get visited, revisited, and probably visited again. Be patient. This is one of the most difficult conversations you are likely to have with the older adult in your life. JCHE's goal is to present you with balanced, helpful information. However, the research on this subject is clear: when older people are part of a community, they are more likely to be active, connected and describe their lives as happy. We see it every day. Here's how one of our residents explained:

*“I came because I saw my mother spend the last years of her life alone in an apartment. Those were years of bitter loneliness. I knew I would never put my children in the position of watching me become sad, lonely. At first I was scared to make the move [to senior housing] because I had never lived in a communal setting. But from the beginning I encountered warmth, kindness and friendship. Now I have enlarged my horizons so. I feel challenged here—I have met people who have had very different experiences than my own. I have read books I never would have even looked at. I have attended lectures I didn't know would interest me. I have listened to music that enriched my experience. Now look at me—here I am, I've got it all—friends, safety, social activity, intellectual stimulation and financial peace of mind. And my children don't worry about me and I never feel like I'm a burden in their lives.”*

-Edith Gillette, a resident of Golda Meir House