



How to Help Mom and Dad Move to a New Home

Here are five tips to make the transition less traumatic for your parents

For most people, moving from one home to another is exhausting. Even when we get help with packing and transporting our possessions, moving means changing countless aspects of our everyday lives — from making a new place for the silverware to potentially finding new friends. And it can mean saying goodbye to memories we've made over the course of years.

Older adults often have a much harder time with the transition. For your parents, moving can go from merely taxing to highly traumatic. That's when it becomes *transfer trauma*, also known more broadly as relocation stress syndrome.

"You're literally transitioning to a completely different phase of life, to a completely different environment," says Tach Branch-Dogans, president and CEO of Moving Memories and Mementos of Dallas, Texas, who spoke at the [Aging in America 2015](#) conference of the [American Society on Aging](#) I just attended. That's true whether a person is voluntarily downsizing or being moved into a nursing home, she says.

Symptoms of Transfer Trauma

Moving can result in a host of physical and psychological changes, including loss of sleep, agitation, depression, withdrawal, short-term memory loss, irritable bowel syndrome, loss of appetite and nausea, Branch-Dogans says.

Tracy Greene Mintz, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in Redondo Beach, Calif., who has worked and lectured extensively in the area of relocation stress syndrome, says loss of control is at the core of transfer trauma.

"This week you're going to be at home living independently; next week you're going to be in assisted living. The abruptness with which we move older people ... is very damaging psychosocially and emotionally because it strips the older adult of control," she says. "Adults want to be in charge of their own lives."

Greene Mintz says the syndrome often manifests itself as pain or fatigue, vague symptoms that can be hard to diagnose; the older adult may say she is too tired to come to the dining hall for meals or in too much pain to take a shower.

“To fix the problem, you need to do everything in your power to restore a sense of control to the older person,” she says.

5 Tips for Adult Children

Here are five ways Greene Mintz says adult children can help ease the transition for their parents:

1. Prepare for the move. Offer choices. You might have a parent who is used to looking out at a garden all day, but they get a view of a fountain instead. Rather than saying, “Well, you got a fountain window — isn’t the fountain beautiful?,” ask questions ahead of time about the older person’s preferences, Greene Mintz says.

“You have to get the details that are meaningful to the resident. The problem with these facilities, these large for-profit assisted living (-type facilities), they’re marketing to the kids,” she says. Involve your parent as much as possible in the discussions and site visits prior to moving. You might ask, would you prefer a high-rise? A first-floor apartment? A place that allows pets?

Little of that will be possible, however, if you need to move a parent during a time of crisis. Planning ahead — as soon as you know that a move will be needed — will make all the difference, Greene Mintz says.

2. Don’t assume your parent can’t participate. “Even a person with **dementia** can tell you what their favorite sweater is, or what sheets they want to bring,” Greene Mintz says. “The details are where you have the possibility of control.”

Too many adult children think they are helping by handling all the details, she says. Once they leave, “the parent is in their new accommodations, looking around, going, ‘Who brought *that*? I haven’t touched that in 20 years.’”

3. Check in. “I always tell people to ask, on the first day, ‘Is it what you were expecting?’ If it isn’t what they thought, then we have early intervention opportunities,” Greene Mintz says. Instead of finding out what their parents’ impressions are, however, too many adult children are busy saying (convincingly, they hope), “Isn’t it great!?” You are not the marketing department, Greene Mintz says. You don’t need to sell it.

4. Validate their feelings. Ask how your parent is feeling about the moving process and don’t try to talk your mom or dad out of any negative feelings. You won’t help by putting a happy face on something they consider sad. Greene Mintz says: “Let them be sad. It’s OK. Just say, I know that this is hard.”

5. Keep the doctor informed. If your parent is showing signs of not adjusting well to the move, report those symptoms — but give the medical provider some context. Explain that the move was recent and may have something to do with the symptoms or behavior, Greene Mintz says.

The doctor may still prescribe medications for **depression** or anxiety but may also recommend yoga or other exercise, for instance.

By Emily Gurnon for Next Avenue

Copyright© 2015 Next Avenue, a division of Twin Cities Public Television, Inc.