Elder Care Options

There often comes a time when an older relative begins having difficulty in getting around or experiences significant hearing, vision or cognitive problems, and we wonder how best to provide them with the care they need. Similarly, if an older relative's partner has died, it can prompt us to consider whether they can continue to cope on their own.

Recognizing the Need

It can be difficult to recognize when an older relative might need more care. The following signs may indicate that your loved one is having difficulty coping:

- Household or personal hygiene is neglected.
- Meals are skipped, are sparse, or there is little food in the house.
- Routine home repairs are left undone and bills are left unpaid.
- Activity and mobility are restricted. They rarely leave home or use only one or two rooms in the house.

Taking on a Caregiving Role

There may be a need to take on more caregiving responsibilities or enlist professional help. What may begin as helping with household chores or errands can quickly become full-time caregiving if the elder's health deteriorates.

This is when it comes time to consider other options, including support for independent living and assisted living options.

Support for independent living can include:

Homecare. There are a number of services that provide support for an elder to remain in their home. Some may be free or offered at a reduced cost by community service organizations. These include:

- Professional nursing, physical or occupational therapy
- Cleaning and home repair services
- Visiting programs
- Meals on wheels
- Transportation assistance
- Emergency response systems

Seniors' apartments and residential communities. If it's time to downsize your elder's living area, consider seniors' apartments or residential communities. These offer independent living and may have common facilities such as swimming pools, saunas or recreation centres with craft and hobby programs.

Care in your home. There are benefits to having an elder loved one reside into your home. These include strengthening your relationship, having help with children, or fulfilling the need to give back to them. However, there are issues to consider. Will there be enough room? Is your home safe for an older person? Can it be adapted if their mobility becomes impaired?

Respite care. If you and your loved one choose homecare, be sure to research respite care. Respite care can mean short-term, in-home help or temporary residential support to give you time off when you need it.

Sometimes health, safety or cognitive concerns make it necessary to find a more intensive level of support. Assisted living options include:

- **Retirement homes.** Most offer independent living with amenities such as meals, transportation and activities. They may also provide supportive services such as nursing, bathing, dressing and help, as needed, with daily activities.
- **Nursing homes or long-term care.** These cater both to older adults who need skilled nursing services and those who need extended health care.
- **Palliative care.** This can be provided in the home, or in a nursing home, long-term care facility or hospital. Services can include pain management and emotional, spiritual and physical support for anyone requiring end-of-life care.

Choosing Care

When considering the options, it's important to involve other people who will have a role in the care of your elder family member. This may include other family members, close friends or existing care providers. Where possible, discussion should involve the elder concerned.

Early involvement allows your loved one to retain some control over their lives, which can be critical for their emotional well-being. Try to start talking about living arrangements before a crisis makes a change imperative. Seniors need to maintain their independence and dignity. Try to listen to their concerns, and understand their fears and anxieties. Make sure each conversation focuses on their health and well-being, and your love and concern for them.

These discussions may be difficult and emotional and can rekindle unresolved family issues, especially where loss and grief are also present. In addition to practical resources, look into what kind of emotional and psychological support is available for yourself, your family and your elder relative. Consider contacting a professional for support with your concerns about elder care.

Evaluating Needs and Preferences

Consider your elder's needs with respect to health, safety, cognitive, social, emotional and lifestyle issues. Could they stay in their home with home-based services? Can you create a network of family and friends to make this easier? Are there modifications that would make homecare safer? Is moving closer to another family member appropriate?

Also consider financial resources. Research the cost of each living arrangement. Some may be covered in whole or in part by a provincial health plan. Seniors may also be eligible for government assistance, depending on their condition.

Develop a List of Options

Write out the options based on your elder's preferences. Contact suitable organizations and request literature. Review their website, if they have one. Create a fact sheet with information on accreditation, location, style

of accommodation, qualifications of staff, services and amenities available, and costs. Add any other relevant items, such as extracurricular programs, proximity to relatives/friends, etc.

Identify a “short list” of at least three preferred facilities, communities or care providers and set up meetings. Experts recommend a formal interview and, if possible, an unannounced return visit.

The Final Choice

Unless the elder is critically ill or suffering from cognitive impairment, they should participate in making the final decision about their living arrangements. The most effective and helpful role is to provide support and information to help them make the best decision.

The realization that an aging family member requires some level of assistance can raise many questions and concerns. Most can be addressed once you and your family understand the options and levels of care offered. Thorough research is the first step in determining the solution that will best suit you and your older family member.