Sharing your home with an older relative: weighing the pros and cons

Many caregivers admit that choosing whether or not to move an older relative into their home is one of the most difficult decisions they have ever had to make. It's certainly a decision that will have a major affect on the lives of everyone involved.



Planning can be the key to a successful shared living arrangement and should start before any firm decisions are made.

Making the right decision. It's important to be realistic about your existing relationship with the elder relative(s). Some people simply aren't made to live together and it's better to face this early before plans are made. You should also discuss expectations and make sure that both the elder and family members are communicating honestly. Practical considerations, including available outside support, should also be considered at this stage.

Discuss expectations. Sit down with your elder relative and discuss his or her reasons for wanting to live with you and the concerns you both may have. Be honest and realistic about measures that can be taken to address these concerns. Make sure your expectations are in sync. You may be hoping for a ready-made babysitter, which may not fit with your relative's plans. Similarly, he or she may be expecting to be included in all family activities, which may not be practical or desirable.

Do not disturb. Be sure to consider and talk about the need for privacy, both yours and the older person's. How much privacy is desired? How much is possible? It’s also important to discuss expectations and concerns with your children and partner. Is everyone prepared for the changes that will have to be made? Can difficulties be overcome?

Practical considerations. Consider how much care your relative needs and how much you can realistically give. Check whether community services can provide any necessary additional care, and/or talk with extended family members about what support they are able and willing to give.

- Consider what home modifications may need to be made to address safety and mobility needs. A community occupational therapist may be able to help assess the situation.
- Review where the older person's friends and healthcare providers are located. It will be important for your relative to maintain social connections. Is this practical? What transportation arrangements can be made?
- Discuss what you will do if the shared living arrangements don't work out. Be realistic about the possibility and agree on potential options.

Financial changes. Household expenses may change. Will your relative be able to contribute? If not, is financial assistance available for home modifications or will other family members help share the expense? It’s also worth considering how your career may be affected by the change, for instance, whether your income may be reduced by flex hours.

Consider a trial visit. If at all possible, a temporary stay can help you all assess whether a permanent shared living arrangement is likely to work. Arrange a visit of up to two months and try out proposed new routines and accommodations. After the trial period, discuss whether 'wrinkles' can be ironed out or whether it would be better to make alternative living arrangements.

Making shared living work. If you follow all the planning suggestions, you'll be off to an excellent start and may find that your older relative makes a wonderful addition to your home. Problems will arise along the

way, as they do with all living arrangements, but preparation and realistic expectations can help lessen the impact.

Further tips:

- Even with the best intentions, the first few weeks will undoubtedly be a little difficult for everyone. Expect to run into a few problems and try to address them quickly and openly.
- Establish new routines quickly. Structure will help all involved feel secure with the new arrangements.
- Involve the whole family in the elder person's move into your home. Encourage children to share in the preparations and actual move.
- Help your relative make their room comfortable and familiar. If possible, let them bring favourite furniture items or decorative pieces.
- Encourage the elder person to keep up their social contacts and lead an independent life.
- Reserve family time each week without the elder relative. Encourage your children to be open with you about concerns and difficulties.
- Make sure your elder relative maintains regular contact with healthcare providers. This can be a valuable resource for you and can ensure your relative's physical and emotional needs are being met.

Though the process may be challenging, when it works, having a parent or older relative move in can be beneficial for everyone. It gives the adult child and their family an opportunity to enjoy their older relative and can provide the parent or older adult with the support they need and the companionship they may desire. But it’s not for everyone. By planning in advance, being realistic about your expectations, and communicating openly, you, your family, and the elder(s) involved can decide if co-habitation is the route for you.