

Help Is Available for Evaluating Whether To Care for an Elder in Your Home

When an older person is not able to live alone independently, frequently the first and last response is for family members to arrange for their relative to move into their home. Many multi-generation families find that the experience is fulfilling, enriching, and helps everyone as finances and child-rearing and household tasks are shared. In other cases, however, having elder relatives live with children or grandchildren is not the best choice for the elder or the younger members of the family. In the most extreme cases, these arrangements may even lead to violence against the older person or place the elder person at risk from neglect when the family does not have the capacity to properly care for their elder relative.

If you are considering having an older person move into your home, or if you are an older person thinking about living with a younger family member, you need to examine your situation to determine if it bodes well for living together, gather information about other options, then make a reasoned decision together.

Will Living Together Work?

Questions to ask yourself include:

* Why do I want to live with my older/younger relative? Good reasons include a desire to spend time together, especially if grandchildren have not previously had a chance to be with grandparents, saving the cost of maintaining two households, sharing household and childcare responsibilities, or, of course, the wish to enhance the quality of life of a beloved elder relative.

If the first reason that came to your mind, however, is "Because I am expected to" or "Because I should" or "Because I will feel guilty if I don't" then you need to carefully examine whether this is motivation enough to make the sacrifices that will need to be made on the part of both generations. Guilt breeds resentment, which is not what you as an older person or younger caregiver need.

* Can the younger person provide appropriate care for the older person? You can be encouraged about the decision of having a multi-generational family if a younger family member will be always available who can lift the older person and otherwise handle the physical stress of care giving, if members of the family are easy-going and the stress of providing and receiving care will not lead to daily arguments and anger, and if someone in the family has several hours per day to devote to the older person, if that will be required. If you are concerned about your ability to care for an older relative or your younger relative's ability to care for you, remember that the emotional and physical demands will only grow in the future.

* What kind of family relationship have you had in the past? Close, positive relationships in which all family members are allowed to be themselves and in which there is great friendship and affection may grow with greater proximity.

However, relationships that have not been good in the past will most likely get worse. For some reason, many people assume that when an older person moves in with younger people old disagreements and personality conflicts will disappear. If previous short visits have ended with everyone relieved as the airplane home appeared on the horizon, everyone should think hard before making the arrangement permanent.

* Consider the home where everyone will live. You will want to be sure that it has enough room for everyone to live comfortably together. It should be a safe environment for elders. Homes with frail elders need to have rooms where the elder will be, including a bathroom, living, sleeping, and eating space, all on the first floor.

* Does the entire family agree that having an elder move in is the best choice? Successful situations are ones where everyone, including those besides the elder and the primary caregiver, are looking forward to the move. Surveys have shown that many elders do not want to move in with their children. It is easy for a son or daughter who sees that a parent is not able to live alone to make plans for the parent that the parent does not want, but is too uncomfortable to stop. In addition, much family strife is caused when one spouse wants a family member to move in and the other doesn't. Before making a move, be sure that everyone affected is in agreement.

The Council on Aging's Elder Services Coordinator also offers telephone and in-person counseling to make a good relationship even better or improve a difficult family situation.

Finally, your multi-generational family should keep an eye out for the many intergenerational activities offered at the Council on Aging -- performers, educational programs, movies, and other events can all be fun ways for children and elders to spend time together.

Considering Other Options

If the questions above have made you reconsider living in a multi-generational family, you should consider other options:

In-home Services. A visiting nurse, home-delivered meals, chore service, a personal care assistant, companions, and other in-home help can assist elders in living independently in their homes for years. While elders may not be able to live in their own homes with this kind of help indefinitely, they may be able to buy enough time to make sure that a good choice for care is made.

Independent Living and Assisted Living. Each month new assisted and independent living facilities are opening for elders who may have difficulty living on their own but do not need constant care. Moving into one of these that is near to family members may provide elders with the closeness that families may wish, the care they need, and the independence and privacy that can make life sweet.

Home-sharing. Sometimes elders may wish to move in with younger people, just not their own family. Adult foster care programs, in which elders move in with families not their own, and programs that match elders with younger people who move into the elders' home and provide services in exchange for reduced rent can be good solutions for many families.

Nursing homes. For some elders, nursing home care is the only reasonable choice. Their needs are greater than the family can provide. It is best to make use of this option when it is needed rather than try a care giving arrangement that will be frustrating to the care provider and dangerous to the elder.

For more information about in-home services, assisted living and nursing facilities and other options, call the Council on Aging. We have extensive literature about facilities and how to choose a good one and we can arrange and monitor in-home services.

If you are an older or younger relative contemplating joining households with relatives and would like to talk about these alternatives or get more information on care giving, care options, or services, the Council on Aging is here to assist you. Please call us at 781-275-6825 or come by between 8 and 4 Mondays through Fridays.