

My Loved One Needs Memory Care - Now What Do I Do???

by Niki Gewirtz



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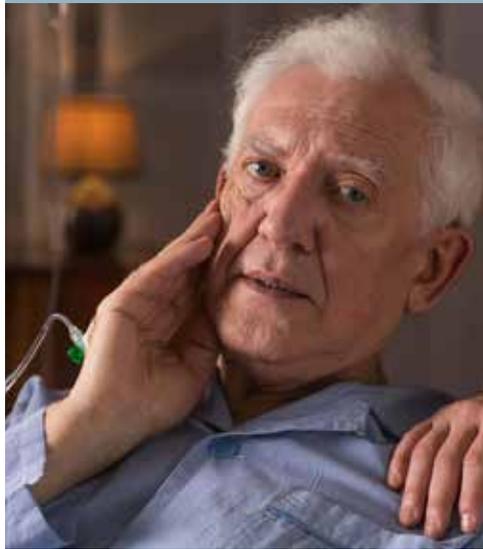
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As a 22 year veteran in senior healthcare, I have seen the gamut of assisted living and memory care communities - the large, small, high-end and modest. The good, bad and the ugly. When I started working with seniors in memory care, it was the mid 90's and everything was about reality-orientation. We needed to make sure our residents with dementia knew what day it was, the weather, the season, and all the headlines in the news. Never-mind that some of these people didn't even know their own families and were non-verbal! Fast forward 20+ years, and we have learned a lot about how to better take care of our folks, using validation methods that meet our residents where they are in the disease process.

As a family member or legal representative looking for a memory care community, you are surrounded by so many options - assisted living, assisted living with memory care, stand-alone memory care, small group homes, and skilled nursing facilities, just to name a few. Amenities, staffing, and care services also vary from place to place. So how do you know what to look for to ensure the best care for your loved one?

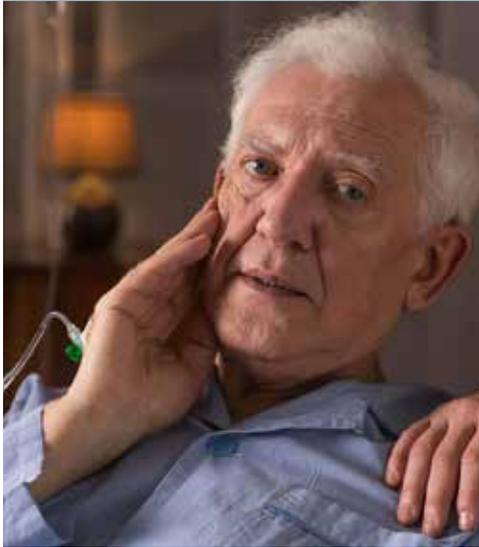
If you are starting your search by using a placement agency (a company that helps you find a community, at no cost to you), make sure you do your homework first. That will save you and placement rep a lot of time. Obviously if you are in a crisis-mode, you may not have all the information you need at that time, but as much as you can prepare, the better. You will want to know what financial resources your loved one has to use toward the cost of care, any formal dementia diagnosis, care needs, behaviors related to the dementia (very important that the communities know if there are any aggressive or combative behaviors), medications, and who the key decision makers are if there are more than one. Don't shy away from talking about things like incontinence, resistance to care needs like showering or incontinence care - the more the community knows up front, the better they can assess whether or not they can care for your loved one. Sometimes you just won't know the answers to these questions, and that is ok, but try to be as forthcoming as you possibly can during that initial discovery process.



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When you finally narrow down your search to the communities you want to visit, if you have never seen a memory care community, prepare yourself to see things you may have never experienced before, especially if your loved one is still fairly high-functioning. You may see residents who are more declined than your loved one, so make sure to ask the community representative to show you other residents who might be similar in functioning to your loved one. Many of these communities allow their residents to age in place - meaning that they can come in at higher levels of physical and mental functioning, and go through the progression of decline while staying in the same community. That is important to many families who don't want to have to move their loved one again, so keep that in mind when you see these residents who are more advanced in their dementia care needs - that will be your loved one some day, and isn't it nice to know they can still get great care by the staff who has gotten to know and love them!

So, you are in the community touring - what should you be looking for? How does the layout of the community help support people with dementia? Does it allow for ample walking opportunity and good flow to the environment? Purposely-built memory care communities will have this in mind, as many people with dementia want to move and walk, and will get frustrated if they are just going back and forth down a single corridor. How does it smell? When you walk in, are you hit by a wall of urine-smell, or is it fresh? People in memory care communities frequently have incontinent accidents, but how is the community taking care of it? How do the residents look? Are they engaged and look clean? There should be interaction between the residents and staff members. You may see residents sitting by the nursing station (a popular place to people-watch!) or even taking a little snooze. That is ok! They feel comfortable in their environment, and the whole building is their home - not just the room where their bed is. Is there a good outside area accessible to the residents to come and go independently? It is so important to get fresh air and have the ability to go outside in a safe environment. Is the staff friendly and engaging with you when you are there touring? These are the people who will be taking care of your loved one (not the pretty carpet and curtains!), so see how they are interacting with

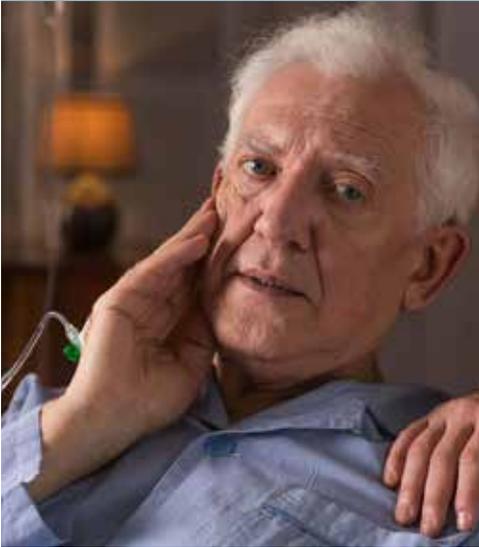


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so see how they are interacting with the residents and with each other - are they friendly and caring? What reaction do you have to the community? Do you feel like it is a place your loved one would feel comfortable and safe? Would you want to live there if you needed that type of care? Every community has a different vibe, and you will know what speaks to you.



Once you feel like you have made the decision, make sure you have all the pricing and contract details up front. Does the community have all-inclusive pricing (care costs included with the rent), or do they have levels of care that are dependent on specific care needs? What is the community fee? Are there any other fees for incontinent care/products, diabetic management (if provided), medication management, etc. Is there a beauty shop on site? What medical professionals come to the community? These are all important to know upfront, so you know what you will be responsible for providing, and what the community will provide. The last thing you want is to think the cost is one thing, but then learn it is a much higher rate due to additional levels of care that weren't disclosed up front. What is the policy on when/why someone would need to be discharged? Again, it is important to know these things and have realistic expectations of what types of care needs the community can safely manage - every community is different, so staffing, availability of nurses and other variables can make a big difference in what is available. A good community will not over-promise just to get the move in... in the end, that isn't helping the resident, the family, or the community.

If you have any specific questions about what questions to ask when looking at memory care communities, or what to look for when touring communities, please reach out to Jill, or you are more than welcome to reach out to me, and I am happy to help!

Niki Gewirtz has been a leader in senior healthcare for over 20 years, managing independent living, assisted living and memory care communities in California and Colorado. Niki is now a Senior Living Advisor with A Place For Mom, helping families to find communities and resources for care.

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