

KENDALL GAZETTE

Ask Helen



Location is Not the Most Important Factor in Selection of a Senior Living Community

BY HELEN SHAHAM

Q. *My mother lives in an assisted living residence about an hour's drive from my home. I work full-time and can't get there as often as I would like. My sister lives in Chicago and obviously is too far away to help. Should I move my mother closer to me or let her know that cannot visit her very often?*

A. When caregivers and relatives shop around for the right place for a parent or elderly relative, they usually look for a location convenient to where they live. However, it's more important to choose somewhere that suits the parent or relative's individual needs. As your mother is already living in a residence you must be guided by whether she has adjusted and seems happy there.

Check out the following: Does your mother like it where she is? Are the staff caring and the healthcare professionals attentive to her needs? Is she friendly with the other residents and does she participate in activities? Is the administrator sensitive to problems that may arise and willing to give you the contact numbers for top decision makers if you should need to discuss your mother's well being?

If mom appears comfortable and settled in a well-run residence, then by

all means keep her where she is regardless of the distance from you. Moving to unfamiliar surroundings can be very unsettling for elderly people.

It would help if you can face up to your conflicting feelings. I think you are troubled by your inability to visit your mother often and have to cope with the guilt that many children feel when a parent moves to a senior residence. You may also feel ambiguous about your sister's role and unhappy that she is letting you shoulder the entire burden. Practically speaking, your sister is not doing her part, but from my experience, responsibility for a parent inevitably falls on one child, and you're "IT!"

To resolve your concern about visiting, I suggest you look at the big picture. Like all elderly people, your mother doesn't want to feel neglected or forgotten so, besides visiting whenever you can, you have to work out ways for her to get the attention she craves.

Make the telephone your first link and call her as often as possible. Why not set up a routine to call at the same time every week, say Wednesday evening after dinner & Friday morning before breakfast? At those times you can find out if anything is troubling her or needs action from you. At other times during the week pick up the phone whenever you have spare moment for an "I just called to say hello" connection.

Discuss the phoning routine with your sister and let her set her own time to call schedule. If your mother hasn't got her own answering machine, then you and your sister might want to get her one and if necessary, show her how to retrieve her messages. Keeping in touch also means actively involving the whole family to call Grandma whenever they can (put her number on speed dial – we're not counting phone bills here, it's their grandmother.) Give her phone number to other members of

the family and ask them to keep in touch with her too.

Don't discount the importance of snail mail. Older people love to get letters and cards. If your children are young, have them draw pictures and mail them to Grandma along with photos for her to display in her room. If they're teenager, invest in a pack of stamped postcards (just like summer camp!) and insist they send one to Grandma each week, even if the message is very short. If you have adult children they should be reminded to pick up the phone sometime in their busy schedules.

The point is that your mother should feel wanted even if you cannot visit as often as you would like. Take comfort in the fact that she is being cared for in a manner that meets her medical, social and emotional needs. Her quality of life depends on her being safe, comfortable and connected.

Helen Shaham and her husband Jacob have been operating retirement communities for nearly 30 years. The Palace Suites in Kendall is a luxury Independent Living Community for active seniors. In addition, The Palace at Kendall campus is home to two Assisted Living Residences and a Nursing & Rehab Center. They also operate The Palace Gardens Assisted Living Community in Homestead, Homestead Manor Nursing Home and The Palace @ Home, a Medicare Certified Home Health Agency. Their two newest projects are The Palace at Weston – luxury living for those 55 and over, and The Palace Tel-Aviv, a continuing care retirement community in Israel. They have two communities under development – The Palace at Weston Senior Living and The Palace at Coral Gables. More information can be found on the company website, www.thepalace.org or by calling 305-270-7000.