

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Having an Older Relative Move In: Making the Transition a Smooth One

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 benefit from their wisdom and experience. It provides the parent or older adult with the support they need and the companionship they may desire.

However, this decision can dramatically alter the lifestyle of both the parent and the adult child's entire family. That is why it is important to understand the financial, legal and relationship impact it will have on everyone involved.

Setting Some Ground Rules

Once everyone has agreed that this is a good idea, it is best to create some guidelines to ensure the transition is a smooth one.

Financial. Spell out financial obligations on both sides. If parents are contributing, be sure to have a written record of the amount of rent, food expenses (if sharing meals) and other household expenses you are sharing (e.g., cable, electricity, phone, heating costs). Keep track of renovation or retrofitting costs as well. Having everything in writing will prevent any future misunderstandings with parents and/or siblings.

Legal. Consider drawing up a legal document. When children and their parents become involved in home ownership, renting from one another or sharing living expenses, it can be a good idea to have all of this documented officially. It is also a good time for your parent to create a Power of Attorney document that determines who will make financial and health decisions should your parent become mentally or physically incapable.

Emotional/Relationship. While you may both be looking forward to spending more time together, it is a big adjustment for your family (children and spouse) as well as your parent. Whether your parent lives in a separate apartment in your home or shares your living space, this close proximity will change your relationship.

Changing Roles

Not only will it be difficult for the parent to come to terms with leaving their home, but both parties will have to deal with privacy issues and changing roles. For example, your parent might have been the dominant person in his/her household and suddenly realizes he/she is no longer in charge. Conversely, you and your family might have difficulty accepting the advice or involvement of another parental figure in your family affairs.

Conflict can also arise when the adult children overstep their care giving role and begin treating their parents like children. It is important to remember that even if your parent's physical and mental capacities are declining, they should be treated with respect and dignity. The key to making this new relationship work is open communication. Before your parent moves in, have a candid conversation about the challenges you will face together.

Making Your Home Safe for Older Adults

Whether your parent will have their own apartment in your home or share your living space, there are a number of things you can do to ensure the environment is safe:

- Be sure all stairways (inside and outside the home) have secure handrails.
- Install grab bars/rails in showers, bathtubs and beside toilets.
- Be sure entryways are well lit.
- Be sure non-skid mats secure all carpets.
- Place emergency numbers beside all phones.
- Be sure there are working smoke detectors in parent's room/apartment.
- If your parent uses a wheelchair, ensure there are sturdy ramps on all stairways leading to the house. You may also need to widen doorways and make other wheelchair-friendly adjustments to your home.

Ensuring Privacy and Comfort

Leaving their own home behind will be enormously difficult for your parent. But providing a space that is as comfortable, convenient and private as possible will help them feel at home. Your parent's apartment or room should include a television, telephone, a separate bathroom (if possible) and perhaps even a small refrigerator. Be sure it is bright, well lit and unencumbered by any stray electrical cords for safety.

Helping Your Parent Feel Part of the Family and Community

Even if your parents have been regular visitors or actively involved in your family's life, fitting into their new role in your household will take a lot of adjusting on both sides. It is important that your parent or older relative be made to feel useful and have a specific role in your family.

Perhaps he or she can be chief gardener, baker, sewer, or simply be able to help out with household chores, if possible for them. Similarly, you should be clear what their role can/should be with your children to limit tension caused by unwanted advice.

Feeling comfortable and at home in a new neighborhood will also help your parent adjust to sharing your home. Here are some ideas for helping parents get to know your community:

- **Banking.**Take your parent into the local branch of their bank to meet the manager and transfer their account, if necessary.
- **Shopping.** Take your parent to the grocery store, convenience store, butcher, etc.
- **Spiritual life.** If your parent has been a member of a church or other religious organization, take him/her to the one closest to your home and find out what it has to offer, how to join, etc.
- **Senior's centres and groups.** Help your parent research these groups, which can be in a church, recreation centre, etc. They offer luncheons, exercise and craft classes, movie or bingo nights, and other activities all geared to seniors.
- **Medical care.** If needed, arrange for a new doctor and dentist for your parent.
- **Neighbors.** Introduce your parent to your neighbors.

Helping Your Own Family Cope

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Many people reap enormous enjoyment and benefits from having an older relative move in. However, there are also challenges that you will face. Some common issues include:

- How do your spouse and/or children feel about having your parent move in?
- Do they worry that you will have less time for them now?
- Are they willing to adjust their lifestyle and behavior? Eg., will they be sensitive to the older adult's need for privacy, quiet?

Having a parent or older relative come to live will certainly take some adjustments. It may mean more work, less time for yourself and a changing family dynamic. Be sure to:

- Take time for yourself on a regular basis.
- Attend to your relationship with your partner or children: make time for them, even if it means hiring homecare or nursing support.
- Ask for help and accept it.
- Make use of community supports.
- Be open and honest with the older relative.

Living with an elderly relative certainly comes with its fair share of both challenges and meaningful rewards. By preparing your home and your family for the change, and being aware of potential issues that may arise, you set the groundwork for a successful transition.

As everyone involved gets comfortable with the new situation, the more that you are able to establishing a culture of clear and open communication between all of the people in your home, the more likely you are to reap more of the benefits, and more smoothly overcome the challenges, in your newly formed household.