

# Managing Senior Transitions

*“Life is full of transitions and new chapters.”*

This is easy to say but not to experience.

Right now, in the life of our congregation, we have many making tough choices concerning transitions – for themselves or for their loved ones: placing spouses in assisted living, moving to live in places with more access to amenities, whether that’s closer or further away from family and friends.

It is understandable, and natural, to feel guilty and conflicted when making decisions about placing a spouse or a parent into assisted living, or asking parents to move to a better location. We may find some consolation in knowing that we’ve made our decisions with the best intentions, considering our loved one’s wellbeing and safety. When our decisions are made after careful consideration of their needs and available options, with the goal of ensuring their care and comfort, as well as balancing our own needs, then the feelings of guilt will likely be related to grief and adjustment rather than wrongdoing.

**Why the guilt?** Perhaps: **(1) Loss of control.** Spouses, or adult children, may feel guilty for relinquishing control over their loved ones’ care, even if it’s necessary. **(2) Broken promises.** Spouses and children may have made promises to care for each other at home, and placing them in senior care may feel like a broken promise, especially for spouses who have vowed to care for each other “until death do us part.” Parents may have expressed a desire to stay at home and adult children may have promised to fulfill that wish. **(3) Societal expectations.** In some places, there may be pressure to expect families to provide 24/7 care at home or stigmas associated with assisted living, leading to feelings of shame and inadequacy. **(4) Anticipatory grief.** Even before a loved one’s passing, there can be grief associated with the changes in our relationship with them and the loss of what once was. **(5) Feelings of failure.** Some adult children feel they are failing their parents by not providing 24/7 care at home, especially when the children feel that caring for their parents in their final years is a way to “return the favor” for the many years of parental nurture. **(6) Emotional distress.** Seeing a parent needing a higher level of care can be emotionally distressing for adult children, and witnessing this very fact may cause feelings of grief; some may back away, wishing to remember their loved one “the way they were.” **(7) Family dynamics.** Family relationships are

complex; some siblings may live closer, have more flexible jobs or working hours, are better at caregiving than other siblings; grief and shame can be part of our experience when we cannot equally share the responsibility of caring for loved ones equally between siblings.

### **When to stay at home & when to go elsewhere for better care?**

*Things to consider:*

- Are you seeking to prolong their life as much as possible or to make it the most comfortable? (*Quantitative vs. qualitative.*) These do not need to be mutually exclusive; can a balance be struck?
- What takes high priority for you: fulfilling a person's desire or doing what's best for them medically?
- How far are you willing to disrupt your family life, marriage, social, and work life to care for an aging and ailing parent or spouse? Would such a disruption cause guilt in the one you are caring for?
- If caring for a parent, have you come to a mutual understanding with your siblings and your spouse?
- If caring for a spouse, have you come to an understanding with the rest of your family? Are there major disagreements and opinions about what is best?
- If you live at a distance from your aging parents, should you move closer, they move closer, or should they remain under care where they are currently? Again: quantitative vs. qualitative. Also consider: **palliative care** (focusing on providing relief and comfort) or **curative care** (aimed at curing or managing an ailment).
- There is no one right answer for these situations. Many have determined that being comfortable at home (yours or theirs) as long as possible is the better option; just as many have concluded that having the best care and medical oversight is better. It's not either/or; there are many factors that are unique to your situation.

### ***How to cope with grief and guilt:***

- **Acknowledge your conflicted feelings and guilt.** Guilt is a normal reaction; acknowledging it is the first step in processing it. A guilty conscience doesn't make good decisions.
- **Focus on the positive.** What's best for them? Medical care? Supervision? Safety? Social interaction?
- **Remember that you, too, are human.** You have safety features built-in called "limitations." Accept that you cannot do everything and that seeking professional help is a sign of strength, not weakness.
- **Communicate with your family.** Open and honest communication can help you come to some agreement or compromise, and certainly a strategy for sharing responsibilities with others.
- **Seek support.** Remember that little talk about "limitations" from earlier? Talk to friends, family members, or a therapist about your feelings. You are not the first one in this situation making these decisions. You are not alone.
- **Prioritize self-care:** Put on your own oxygen mask first before helping others. Taking care of your own physical and mental health is crucial for caregivers. **Taking care of yourself is NOT being selfish.** (Read that last sentence again . . . and again.) Caregivers who cannot care for themselves are not, ultimately, good caregivers for others.

**Shouldn't we care for our parents; after all, they helped raise us?** Caring for aging parents is not necessarily a one-to-one comparison to parents raising children. Raising children is often expected, coming near the beginning of setting down roots, and becomes a joyful way to launch a life. But caring for aging parents is often unexpected, causing somewhat of a disruption to well-established routines and lifestyles, and can come with much more emotional complexities relating to grief and loss. Aging parents often require more complex, multi-point medical care from specialists (that's not to say that raising child is hands-free). It's unfair to be forced into caring for aging parents *just because* it is what society thinks is a good way to show your appreciation to your parents. Recognize that these are complex situations. If you think their quality of life would improve by living with you, or near you, then pursue that with all your heart. Living at home may provide a sense of security and familiarity, which can be especially important for individuals with early stages of cognitive decline (especially if they aren't alone most of the time). Your home may be a good option for social interaction compared to other options; it may also deepen the bond between parent and child, or between

siblings, too. Just remember: Providing constant care can lead to physical and emotional exhaustion and it may strain relationships; these are not conducive to the practice of caregiving. If your loved one gets hurt while under your care, you may also feel guilty over this. Unless your name ends with “PH.D.,” “M.D.,” or “R.N.,” you may not be the best doctor or nurse that they *need*.

**Financial Considerations.** I know it feels icky to have to consider finances when thinking about the care of your spouse or parent. So sterile and cold. But it’s the world we live in. This part is too complex to address here. Reach out to your local Aging and Disability Resource Center about your options. There are ALWAYS options out there. You are only limited by the extent of your knowledge and research.

*Here are some books that may interest you:*

- “Life Worth Living: How Someone You Love Can Still Enjoy Life in a Nursing Home” by William H. Thomas, M.D. (1996)
- “When Someone You Love Needs Nursing Home, Assisted Living, or In-Home Care: The Complete Guide” by Bornstein/Languirand (2001)
- “Nursing Homes: The Family’s Journey” by Peter S. Sillin (2001)
- “Nursing Home 101: A Daughter’s Perspective” by Ruthie Rosauer (2021)
- “It’s Not Too Late: The Ultimate Guide to Nursing Home Medicaid for the Stressed-Out Husband or Wife” by Ethan Huizenga (2021)
- “How to Care for Aging Parents” Virginia Morris (2025)
- “Eldercare Handbook: Difficult Choices, Compassionate Solutions” (‘06)
- “Nursing Homes and Assisted Living: The Family’s Guide to Making Decisions and Getting Good Care” by Peter S. Silin (2009)
- “Planning for Long-Term Care for Dummies” by Carol Levine (2014)
- “Successfully Navigating Your Parents’ Senior Years: Critical Info. to Maximize Their Independence” by Star Bradbury (2023)
- “Living Well in a Nursing Home” by Lynn Dickinson (2006)
- “Dementia Caregivers Share Their Stories: A Support Group in a Book”
- “Dignity for Deeply Forgetful People: How Caregivers Can Meet the Challenges of Alzheimer’s Disease” by Post/Angelica (2022)

**TALK TO PASTOR ABOUT GETTING ANY OF THESE, OR SIMILAR, BOOKS.**