

Coping after Placement into Residential Care

Moving a loved one with dementia into a residential care setting is by far one of the most painful decision and action a caregiver will ever take. For many, the marriage vows of “in sickness and health” plague the well spouse and for adult children past conversations and promises to care for parents “no matter what” can be haunting. But when marriage vows were taken or adult children had conversations with parents, most never factored in, much less understood the progression and consequences of 24/7 care when living with dementia.

Moving a loved one into the best of settings still represents a huge sense of loss. This was not the plan. But it happened anyways. You cried your eyes out. You beat yourself up thinking you are a failure. You second guess this decision and think that maybe you can bring your loved one home in a month or so once you get rested or the behavior is under control. You go to visit and don't like what you see. After all, you've been doing this job for years and you know what your loved one needs.

Your emotions are on a roller coaster – a sense of relief on one hand and then a real sense of loss and “what now?” Your house is empty and so quiet. Your friends and relatives try to console you and tell you that it will be better – that you will be better now that you can get some rest. But the reality is that you are grieving! Everything you are thinking and feeling are NORMAL – even the bad thoughts.

Here are some steps you can take that can help you cope with all you are feeling and experiencing:

- Acknowledge your loss and give yourself permission and time to grieve what was, what is, and what will be. You need time and there is no specified timeline – every caregiver is different.
- Establish new ways to be with your loved one in this new setting. Focus on your relationship with your loved one now that the tasks are being done by others. Enjoy listening to music, a special treat, holding hands, saying a prayer – whatever brings you both comfort and joy.
- Find a confidant that you can talk to – who will listen to you without giving advice unless you ask for it. Join a support group and learn from others who have walked this road.
- Define your new purpose as an advocate for your loved one. Help residential staff know who your person is and how they can best connect and care for them. Be kind as you work with this new set of caregivers because you know how hard this job is and you want them to help your loved one. Don't assume they “should know” what to do. If you know a better way, show/tell them politely.
- Create a short life story and/or photo book the staff can use to learn more about your loved one.
- Give yourself permission to find the avenues for connection and meaning. Your life must go on.
- Visit as you can. There is no perfect prescription. Some will want to visit daily and others may find once a week is enough. Your loved one lives in the present. Once you leave, it is as if you were not there so don't sweat it if you miss a day.
- If you want others to visit, ask them. Help them to know how to make the visit meaningful and successful. If they are not prepared they will be uncomfortable the another visit might never happen.
- Seek professional help and counseling if you feel like you are not moving forward.

Letting go of caring for a loved one is difficult. Feel your pain and allow yourself to look to better days ahead with and without your loved one. They would choose that for you too!