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Nursing Homes

It is hard to put a loved one in a nursing home, but sometimes it has to be

Life is about living and learning while growing older along the way. Everyone knows that age eventually takes its toll; not just on those in their latter years, but also on their relatives and friends. Early in the piece anyone in close contact with an ageing person will notice changes in their behaviour, often small ones that seem quite natural and acceptable. Over time, however, the aches, pains and slowing of movement become noticeable even to outsiders; and are a definite growing concern for family members, particularly with regard to memory loss which is a big worry. Before continuing, and for the sake of empathy, I'm going to use Grace and Harry as examples.

They had been married for over fifty years, had four children and nine grandchildren. Harry ran his own business which meant hard work and long hours, but he always made time for his family. In this, Grace was his pillar of strength, joyfully accepting the role of mother, housekeeper and loving companion. So the day she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis it was a shock for all. Grace, however, brushed off the consequences, mainly for the sake of the others, and carried on pretty much the same as before. At the start the symptoms were relatively mild, enabling her to continue with the cooking and cleaning; and as a kind of bravery reward for her courage in not letting MS beat her, or maybe as a practical distraction, she took up golf.

Having been a golfer for years Harry was quite good, so when he played with Grace he was encouraging and supportive, leaving his competitive streak at the golf club. Then another blow struck the family. Harry was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Fortunately perhaps, in both their cases the individual ailments were the progressively-slow kind and life continued pretty much as before; for a while, anyway. This suited the couple, each being the independent type; as it did their children who had their own families and the associated responsibilities. They did, however, pay frequent visits to make sure the parents were okay and to offer assistance with anything that might have become too hard for them. Needless to say, these offers were generally declined.

But if their family was kind, their respective diseases were not. Grace eventually lost the use of her right arm and leg, while Harry's tremors increased to the point where he couldn't hit a golf ball straight because of an involuntary twitch of the hand. His movements were also slowing and were sometimes erratic. What with his own disabilities and Grace's deteriorating condition, he decided to sell the business to be his wife's full-time carer. If it had dawned on him that he wouldn't be able to do this forever he never let on. Maybe to prove that he, like his wife had done earlier, wasn't going to be beaten by a mere disease, Harry set about renovating the house to make it

accessible for a wheelchair to which his wife had eventually become confined. He also helped out in the kitchen and even did much of the cooking; although Grace still insisted on making the pastry one-handed; plus handling much of the traditional Sunday breakfast fry-up herself.

As well as being a great healer, time can also prove very cruel. Harry was finding it increasingly difficult to cope, while Grace had reached the stage where even personal hygiene was a major issue. Occasional emergency calls to family members for assistance were necessary, particularly when one of them had a fall and the other was unable to help. The situation demanded a change of strategy. Sons and daughters got together to discuss possibilities; and the only one that seemed practical was to engage a carer. On thinking about it, however, unless this person was live-in and a nurse, there would still be times the parents were at risk because they were on their own for extended periods. Reluctantly and regretfully, the subject of a nursing home was broached.

Grace had always maintained that she was never going to be put in a home, no matter what; so, despite it being the safest, sensible option, she was likely to oppose the suggestion. Clearly, this had to be handled very delicately; and the family would need to present the most attractive proposal they could come up with if it was to be even considered by both parents. Much research was conducted, trawling through the names of nursing homes in the area and further afield; checking the facilities offered by each; making a short list, and then visiting those which seemed the most suitable. In this, the family was very choosy; and whereas some homes didn't have the right feel about them, two or three that fitted the desired criteria had no vacancies at that time. It was obviously going to be a waiting game.

Nothing, of course, could be said to their mother until they had something positive to present; but it was decided to bring their father into the equation; and if they could convince him that this was a good move, he might be able to sway his wife should she dig her heels in, which was pretty likely. Harry needed little convincing. He had considered the possibility and had already come to terms with the inevitable. Eventually a place in one of the best homes on their list became available; so it was time for the family to face the challenge. Grace must have been expecting the suggestion, and although somewhat tearful agreed to give it a try. This should have been a relief for the family, which it was, considering the alternatives; but they were harbouring feelings of guilt over repaying their mother's unselfish love for them with an act that seemed disloyal, even callous.

The chosen nursing home proved to be everything it purported to be, and after a brief transition period Grace had to admit that she was starting to enjoy the experience, especially as any required medical attention was on hand and immediate. Harry, however, discovered how lonely it could be on his own. His idea of remaining in the house and visiting Grace daily wasn't, it seemed, such a good one. It was even more frightening when he had a fall or a serious medical episode, particularly in the middle of the night when no-one was around. Biting the bullet, he approached the nursing home to see if he might get a room there. One was available quite near Grace's; but, they told

him, the adjoining room next to his wife's would be vacant soon as the person occupying it didn't have long to live. It was a harsh reality, but also a propitious one for Harry. In just over a week he was able to move to the room next to Grace; and as a bonus there was a connecting door. So Harry and Grace were able to spend their final time together, happily and in ways that were as close to their previous lifestyle as was possible under the circumstances. Seeing this, the family was reassured that their hard decision had been vindicated, and they too were happy.

Although hard to make, the decision for this family proved to be the right one. Frequent visits to the home by individuals and groups helped Grace and Harry accept a different, comfortable lifestyle that did not leave them feeling isolated. Conversely, popping in on their parents regularly and confirming that they were coping reassured their sons and daughters; as well as the grandchildren who needed to know that Nan and Pop were okay, were still there for them and had just moved to a new house.

The success of this story was thanks to a family that cared enough to make exhaustive enquiries before taking the plunge. Anyone facing a similar decision should do likewise. Checking out the available nursing homes and personally inspecting the facilities is important. Seeing whether existing residents appear to be happy with the treatment they are receiving is essential. A friendly chat with some of their visitors can confirm this; or, on the other hand, may shed light on shortcomings of the establishment that the management prefers to keep quiet about. Believe me, mistreatment and neglect on the part of some staff is not unheard of; and you don't want to put your loved one in a place that is going to be investigated by the authorities one day in the future.

Most, however, would seem to be caring and sympathetic to the needs of their residents. Even so, it is advisable to follow up on any complaints of the ones you have convinced to live there. You know better than strangers if they tend to overreact to petty situations. Should they, for example, claim that they are being underfed, or the meals aren't even fit for a dog, visit just before meal times to see for yourself what is being served and whether you consider it has been prepared to the standards that you approve of. So, take any complaints seriously, talk to the management about them; check to see if they have been addressed; and if not, don't allow your loved one to stay there longer than absolutely necessary. That's the very least they deserve.

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