

Memory Loss and Structured Living

SEEKING APPROPRIATE RETIREMENT-COMMUNITY ACCOMMODATIONS CAN BE A CHALLENGE IN ITSELF, LET ALONE TRYING TO FIND SUITABLE PLACEMENT FOR ONE EXPERIENCING DEMENTIA OR OTHER FORMS OF MEMORY LOSS.



Country Meadows maintains a two-tiered, securely gated garden that allows dementia residents to enjoy its gazebos, walking paths and fragrant blooms at their leisure. They even can tend to an herb and vegetable garden, where plants are clearly labeled.

A country kitchen lends a homey touch, as residents can participate in cooking and baking. Even wall art incorporates more than one sense, with tactile accents such as cloth and porcelain.



Instead of name tags, “memory boxes” offer a more personal – and effective – way for residents to identify their rooms.

According to the Alzheimer’s Association, 50 percent of individuals living in nursing homes and assisted-living residences have some form of dementia. With the increasing need for long-term care, the Alzheimer’s Association launched its Quality Care Campaign in 2005. The campaign’s goal is to improve the quality of care for people living with Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia. (For more information on the Quality Care Campaign, support groups, educational sessions and more, visit www.alz.org.)

Every afternoon, Ruth insists she must go home to see her mother, who passed away 30 years ago. While Ruth seems restless and concerned, the staff at the community where she resides is familiar with her behavior. One staff member calmly takes her by the hand, walks outside with her, listens to the birds sing and asks Ruth about her mother. Rather than telling Ruth about her mother’s passing, which would create unnecessary anxiety, agitation and sadness, she allows Ruth to express her emotions openly by validating her feelings. Ruth proceeds to tell the caregiver about her favorite memories with her mother including singing hymns, cooking and other activities that a mother and daughter may enjoy. Shortly after Ruth describes and relives her memories, she is ready to go back inside and participate in a baking activity with other residents.

“Taking care of an elderly person is a challenge,” says daughter Anna. “When you add cognitive dysfunction, it turns into a frustrating challenge. I kept hoping my mother would get better.”

While many individuals want to “age in place,” structured living provided through a community setting is a great solution for those exhibiting signs of dementia. Although it is emotionally draining to consider placing a loved one, care provided through structured living often improves quality of life for both the individual and the caregiver. This allows the caregiver to be less of a “caregiver” and more of a son, daughter, husband, wife, relative or friend – therefore, creating more meaningful visits.

Many retirement communities are designed, decorated and staffed with the needs of those living with memory loss in mind. Staff members receive specialized training, residents receive personal attention and families receive peace of mind knowing their loved ones are cared for to the fullest extent. This care is commonly

referred to as “memory support care” and can be received in a personal-care and/or skilled-nursing setting.

Memory-support care units are often smaller in size, allowing residents to receive more one-on-one care. A wide variety of activities are typically offered throughout the day including exercising, hymn singing, baking, gardening and more. This provides enough structure throughout the day for residents to anticipate what is next. Additionally, communities have the flexibility to allow residents personal down time and one-on-one visits with family, friends or staff members.

It is possible for communities to organize activities and care around the five senses. What follows are things to look for and questions to ask – based on the five senses – as you tour a community in order to determine if it’s a good fit for your loved one. Although no community is like “home,” those that are mindful of addressing the five senses naturally create homey atmospheres.

Listen

Most communities, whether they offer memory-support care or not, provide music therapy. This type of therapy often creates a mood of relaxation and helps individuals relive memories.

Also, observe how the staff is interacting with residents. Are they validating their feelings or are they quickly trying to redirect residents with demands? “Validation helps us understand reasons behind behaviors and it helps those living with dementia reach their goals of resolution,” says Country Meadows Marketing Director Kris Parmer. Hearing is the last sense to go, so it is important that each individual is acknowledged and accepted.

Smell

Many communities offering memory-support care provide secured outdoor walking paths that may incorporate gardens filled with herbs such as lavender, which exudes a sense of calm and relaxation. In addition to gardening activities and the freshness of clean air, communities may offer a country kitchen, allowing residents to participate in cooking and baking activities.

Taste

Studies show that the taste of sweet and salty foods is the last taste sensation to go, hence many communities offer snacks between meals or have ice-cream parlors.

Typically, individuals receiving memory-support care will not remember what they ordered for dinner when the menu was given to them earlier in the day. Therefore, some communities are presenting residents with their options at mealtime rather than asking for their preferences days ahead of time.

Feel/Touch

Individuals living with dementia often enjoy participating in hands-on activities, giving them a sense of purpose. Are residents active in folding laundry, setting tables or arranging other items? Will your loved one be safe at this community and will they have the opportunity to walk around freely? What security measures are in place? Is the community set up as long hallways or is it laid out in a circular pattern, allowing residents to walk around as they desire? What opportunities are available for family members to participate in? Are support groups, educational programs or volunteer opportunities available to provide the families with emotional support?

See

Do residents appear to be well cared for? Is the community decorated with natural colors and an appropriate amount of wall hangings? Outside of residents’ rooms, you may observe memory boxes that are personalized and serve as familiar pieces of their past.

When is it time to start investigating retirement community options? It is never too soon. It is always better to be aware of what options are available to you beforehand than be forced into a position where a loved one must be placed as a result of not being able to live at home safely. Anna says: “No one can foresee the future. When you take care of an elderly parent, you never know what to expect. The first signs of my mother’s cognitive dysfunction alerted me to seek help from professionals that knew what plan of action would be adequate. As her disease progressed, it required a lot more planning, medical consulting and adapting to a new set of rules.”

The emotional drain of seeking placement can be tremendous. While you may feel the need to place your loved one as soon as possible, take time to carefully consider all of your options. Be sure to seek the advice of professionals and the support of family and friends. ❖



Jessica A. Pavelko, CSA, a lifelong Lancaster resident and senior consulting specialist, launched Pavelko Senior Consulting Services, LLC (PSCS) in 2006. The business takes a unique personal and professional interest in seniors and their

families by assisting them in making certain all of the resources are being utilized that best meet an individual’s needs. PSCS acts as an advocate and navigator for seniors, and helps them and their family members make wise decisions regarding the care that they desire and deserve. For more information, contact PSCS at 717-517-8871, e-mail at info@pavelko.org or visit www.pavelko.org.