



Couples with different needs

No two people are ever the same. We live differently, we grow differently. Our genes and environment cause our bodies and minds to adjust. We develop diseases with some similarities but most often with just a little twist in how it unfolds.

So, when it comes to supporting couples in retirement residences we MUST look after the individual first and then the couple. When they say "in sickness and in health", it doesn't refer to one or the other. One person's health does not overrule the others.

As there are as many different individuals, as there are different couples. Some couples struggle to be a couple, others are a picture of love, some are joined at the hip and most are somewhere in the middle. Each different partnership comes with challenges, compromise and *successes*. Therefore, we as caregivers in a retirement residence must learn to work with the personalities, their habits, their likes and dislikes, their triggers and their happy thoughts. We must understand in order to support the couple through a move.

If the couple has shifted to a caregiver and patient, quite often the caregiver has the burden of making the decision to move, either both of them or one of them. If the patient has a more advanced condition such as, dementia then there is often guilt associated with not being able to take care of their partner anymore. In reality by moving into a supportive environment like a retirement residence, the person IS taking care of both of them. By leaving the heavy care to professionals and focusing in on being an advocate and spouse again. *Come to think of it, when the plumbing broke in your house would your partner call a neighbour to fix the problem or would they go to the expertise. (That may or may not illustrate the point depending on your partner.....)*

If the care levels are drastically different, although it's a difficult decision, having the individual live in separate suites is advantageous. The reason is, when the couple remains constantly together the caregiver rarely is able to step away from the heavy care for a variety of reasons: "no one can care for him like I do." "Why can't you do it for me, you are right here!" to name a few.

Having private spaces for each of the residents allows the staff to provide the necessary care without interrupting the care needs of the other resident. They both tend to sleep better, they both have time to participate in the activities that they love, they have their own quiet time, they don't have the other "nagging" at the other. (Yep it happens in all relationships!) Then as a couple, they have time to be partners and spouses again. They watch TV together, they go for walks together, they go on outings together, they invite family and friends in for a visit together, they do whatever they enjoy doing together. When they are tired or need a break or a moment to think, they have a sanctuary to go to. If you asked a couple of 10 couples, 5 of them would say they sleep in the so called "anti-snore" room.

One of the many couples that we had living with us have developed a routine that allowed the spouse to do the things that are important to him and she knew that at 2pm he will be up to see her. She has dementia and often, like most ask where her husband is. When the staff shared the story that he had an



eye appointment and will be up to see her after lunch, she relaxes and carried on. He arrived at 2pm and they enjoy their afternoon show, a coffee in the bistro with other friends, then dinner comes along and they go their separate ways and reconvened at 7-9pm when they enjoy an evening walk, watch the news and discuss the days goings on. After a good night kiss, he left he knocked 3 times on the door and said "night, night I love you" and she knew that she was safe.

If the couple does not see the advantages of separate private suites, then establishing the best set up for them to be together is the goal.

There was another couple that lived together yet separately. The husband had a terminal illness. They had a 1 bedroom but had divided it that each person had their own room. They enjoyed each other's company and the visits with family and friends in their suite. This allowed them to stay together and be in close proximity during the times that they wanted to. They had opportunity to join the activities that they each enjoyed. As the husband progressed through the disease, his wife was thankful that she could sit beside his bed and know when he needed help that the nurses would be there to help. She said "good night Dad, I love you" and he would answer her back "I love you too". On the night he passed, she was right beside him and so thankful that they were not in a hospital, but surrounded by their family and their things in the comfort of their new home. He passed knowing that she would be well taken care of, and she went to sleep knowing that everything that could be done had been done here at the retirement residence. It would not have been the same at home.

Whether the couple has different care needs or not, there are two individuals involved in a single move and both are as important as the other. One person typically is more open to moving than the other. It is important that we find the happy spot for the "not so convinced" spouse just as much as it is to engage the partner that is keen to come.

When a move is coming your way, take the time to talk to the Home's representative and understand what they have had the best success at. Share with them the thought process of all parties involved so that each of the concerns and important points can be acknowledged and planned for to make the transition as smooth as possible and as successful as it can be!

Although most moves are stressful, and one that changes the dynamic of the couple is even more, often when the family looks back on the transition they see that the caregiver was burnt out and needed to draw the line in the sand. As hard as it is, it works out best for each parties.

Consider the options clearly means you must step back and look at the situation from everyone's eyes. It helps to put everything into perspective and see what might be best, even though the first step is the hardest. With all changes, the first step is the most important and the hardest. Family, friends, community supports and the retirement home are all part of the ensemble that allows the transition to happen as smoothly and supportively as possible. We are a

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