



Living in a care home

Feelings of guilt

When a parent, partner, other relative or friend moves into a care home, guilt is a commonly felt emotion. For some this feeling is inevitable, but acknowledging it and thinking through why you feel that way can help you to accept it.

Sense of bereavement

It can be a kind of bereavement when a loved one has to move into a care home, especially if you have been involved in caring for them. Handing over responsibility, even if the move is an acknowledgement that the responsibility is too great, can be a very difficult process. For husbands, wives and partners, the loss of intimacy can be particularly painful.

Was there really an alternative?

A decision on whether to move into a care home is usually taken in circumstances nobody would choose. The final decision may have been caused by a dramatic event that leads to a breakdown in care arrangements or the onset of a sudden or devastating illness. It may have resulted from something that, on the face of it, is of little significance but in a situation already fully stretched, just tips the balance. Relatives ask themselves if they could have done more and perhaps worry how they will be judged, but there are all sorts of complexities and difficult relationships within families. Relatives have to make decisions that balance competing obligations and pressures and which are capable of being sustained for the long term.

Under pressure

Finding the best option in a set of very challenging circumstances can trigger a sense of helplessness, despair or even panic. There may be pressure from agencies such as the hospital or local authority to make arrangements quickly. This pressure can mean that decisions, viewed in hindsight, are seen as inadequate or second-best; such an instinct may well be right. Some relatives who are unhappy at the decision will make arrangements to move their loved one. While not to be undertaken lightly, as moving again can be detrimental to residents' health, it is perfectly possible for a resident to change care homes.

Focus on your relative

While it is good to acknowledge your own thoughts and feelings, remind yourself that your relative – now seen as a 'resident' – has gone through much more of an upheaval. Even if they have difficulty expressing themselves, residents are probably

experiencing their own loss and sense of bereavement, not least for their own home and their independence. The focus must be on their thoughts and feelings.

Looking for clues

If they are settling well and starting to enjoy their new life then take that as a cue to be positive about the move. If they are unhappy or depressed or they talk continuously about coming home, it may be that action needs to be taken. Listen carefully to their concerns. Is there something you could do? Whether action can be taken by you, a GP or the care home will depend on the nature of the problem and it may be that your relative continues to be unhappy but you can be comforted by the knowledge that you have done all you can.

Talk it through

If there seem to be problems within the home, identify what they are and make an appointment to see the manager. Discuss the issues and, if possible, suggest positive solutions. If you want to make a complaint, all homes must have a complaints procedure and the way that complaints are dealt with is monitored by the Commission for Social Care Inspection. However, try not to blame the home if feelings of guilt are triggering your anger or irritation

Engage with the home

The best help you can give your relative is to do everything you can to make sure the care is as good as possible. Getting involved may be a way of putting your feelings of guilt to one side and not letting them overwhelm you:

- visit regularly
- attend relatives' meetings
- ask if you can help with care tasks
- volunteer to help out with activities or trips

Being seen as someone who is prepared to 'roll up their sleeves' for the benefit of residents will help you to feel better and may also make for better relationships with hard-pressed care staff.

Working with other relatives

Does the care home have a relative's group? Here you can meet other relatives and the staff and you can discuss issues and air views in a constructive way. It can be particularly useful if you find that it is not easy to forge a positive relationship with the home as an individual. If there isn't a relative's group talk to the manager about starting one.