

Thoughtful Advice for Choosing a Memory Care Community



Questions to Ask About Memory Care

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Selecting a memory care community for a parent or other loved one can be an emotional and difficult experience. No one is prepared to make these decisions, and it's not something that people talk much about. The good news is that today, as the need for memory support grows, there is a greater selection of communities from which to choose. In addition, the modern approach to memory care is a loving one that is often a more residential vs. institutional setting that supports freedom of choice and promotes individuality. Be assured that by asking the right questions, you can arm yourself with beneficial first-hand information and find a community that is a good fit for your loved one, you and your family.

Questions to Ask About Memory Care

Following is a list of questions to ask memory care providers and some ideas of what to look for in their responses. While other questions may arise, these will provide a good starting point to help you really get to know and understand the culture of each community you consider. Plus, following the same Q&A format each time can simplify the process of comparing communities and help inspire confidence in making the right decision.

What's your care philosophy?

Every memory support program should have an overall philosophy that guides their approach to care and one that team members can easily articulate. A good philosophy will emphasize the importance of focused attention, unconditional love, patience, good listening skills, fostering independence and promoting individuality.

How do you get to know each resident?

The community should have protocols for getting to know each resident on a personal basis. Most communities will complete an Individual Care and/or Service Plan before a resident moves in. This document helps them assess the amount and type of care needed as well as notes personal preferences for morning and bedtime rituals and socializing and details about the resident's life such as careers, hobbies and passions.

Caregivers typically spend the first couple of weeks getting to know the resident firsthand and, then after about 14 days, update the care plan based on personal observations and interactions.

How is your staff trained?

Most states require a minimum of eight hours of memory care training. In addition, many memory care communities offer and require additional dementia sensitivity training, covering topics like communication and coping with challenging behaviors. All team members who serve memory care residents, such as housekeepers, dietary and maintenance, should undergo specialty training.

How do you communicate with residents?

There are simple ways of communicating that help those with dementia feel more at ease. Caregivers should always talk to residents at eye level by sitting in a chair or crouching down, if necessary. Caregivers should invite—not tell—residents to shower, eat, get dressed or to do other tasks.

How do you promote happiness and wellbeing?

Look for caregivers who are focused on preserving a sense of purpose and personal identity for the residents they serve. The ways to accomplish this are as varied and unique as each resident. Some find purpose in helping with community chores like putting away clean dishes or setting up activities, while others enjoy tapping their feet to familiar songs, exercising in rhythm or tending to an outdoor garden. Whatever the activity, it's important for residents to maintain freedom of choice and the ability to be in charge.

Preserving a sense of normalcy is another way to promote wellbeing. This can be accomplished by encouraging residents to keep everyday belongings such as purses, wallets and keys or by providing opportunities for them to complete everyday tasks like making a piece of toast or folding their own laundry.

How do you deal with challenging behaviors?

Many people living with dementia experience a loss of social inhibitions. Because of this, some residents may act angry or touch other residents' belongings. A good caregiver responds with unconditional love and knows that any behavior is a way of communicating needs and not a reflection of who the person is inside.

What is the design of the physical space?

Look for a space where you can feel comfortable sitting and relaxing with your loved one. The décor should feel like home and not an institution or hotel. As many people with dementia are very tactile and comforted by touch, make sure there are soft blankets, fuzzy pillows or other interesting objects around to pick up and hold.

Safe and secure access to the outdoors is a real plus to encourage residents to go outside at will for fresh air, to garden or to simply sit and listen to the birds. The kitchen, like home, should be open for residents to use any time and be equipped with safety features such as induction burners that are not hot to the touch. Make sure the personal living space comfortably fits a bed, dresser and chair and has a private bathroom with safety features.

What safety measures are in place?

All doors should have an alarm that alerts caregivers when they are opened. Thanks to technology, the alert can go straight to caregivers' phones and computers and not be broadcasted throughout the community, which can be upsetting to residents and guests.

What is the dining program?

A dining program should be convenient and flexible. Look for at least a two-hour window for breakfast, lunch and dinner. In between meals, snacks should be provided and residents should be able to request food or prepare a simple snack themselves in the kitchen. Residents' preferred foods should be readily available in the refrigerator or cupboard. Residents should also be able to choose their dining partners and seating. Also, notice the plates, which are best if brightly colored to make the food pop and to stimulate appetite.

What is the family's role?

Family members should be able to come and go as they please any time of day or night. Look for a welcoming environment that makes it easy for loved ones to share meals and visit in comfort and privacy. Inquire about the communication process between the care team and family.

What kind of access to healthcare is offered?

Many communities can coordinate on-site visits with physicians, psychologists, physical, occupational and speech therapists, home health providers and others healthcare professional with whom they partner as needed. Residents should also be allowed to visit any healthcare provider of their choice.

How is the cost determined?

Every memory care community will offer its own fee structure. Some providers have inclusive rates while others' rates are based on the level of care needed as determined by a thorough assessment. Rates typically include a private residence, meals, help with the activities of daily living, medication management and programs and activities. Medications and medical supplies are not usually part of the standard rate.

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