



## **“The Grief of Isolation in Care Communities”**

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It is never easy to make a decision to place a loved one in a care setting, despite the physical care needs, exhaustion of the caregiver, family insistence, or even the direct wish of the care receiver. The emotions involved with a loved one leaving their natural home to take up residence in an Assisted Living or Skilled Nursing community (notice I did not use the word “*facility*” which seems so impersonal), causes a tug of the heart and personal angst for all concerned in the decision-making process.

In the age of COVID-19, this decision has become not only more difficult, but problematic in many ways. Prior to this time, families had the opportunity to visit care communities to see the resident rooms, observe activities and perhaps even have a meal there. Now, in the days of COVID-19 precautions, that must be done by Zoom or by using other very limited measures. There can be no observation of activities and certainly no dining with the residents to experience the ambiance, and “test” the food. Experiencing the “tone” of the environment, checking out the food, meeting other residents and observing the “care” of the staff, gives reassurance to families making this big decision.

This limited exposure not only makes admission to a care community challenging, but also worrisome for most families. For they know all too well that once their loved one moves in, now they cannot touch or hug or even see their loved ones, except for a visit from outside their window through a screen or on Zoom or FaceTime.

In a recent Zoom dialogue meeting, family members described the sadness, grief and stressful nature of not being able to visit their mom/ wife. These emotions are magnified in an Assisted Living that specializes in caring only for persons with cognitive impairment. In this care setting, the emotional pain of families becomes even more dramatic! At this time, this outdoor visit requires that a mask be worn by the resident and the family member. A natural response is “will my Mom even recognize me during this visit? When confusion has surfaced in the past, I just hug my Mom and she knows it is me. Now that is not even possible.”

How does one begin to provide support to these families? It starts with *listening to their pain*. The feelings of guilt quickly rise to the surface in the discussion. “If only we could have kept her home – but her care needs and increased behavioral changes made this impossible. The stress of caregiving was wearing my Dad down, and we are concerned about his health.” Being aware of that person’s pain, listening, really listening, without judgement or providing trite responses,

is paramount to demonstrating care and support – compassion and empathy – for their current, painful experiences.

Through all of this, it is important that families know that although their loved one is in a care setting, they are still considered caregivers. Families are now experiencing new and different emotions due to this required “distancing” from their loved ones. Normalizing their feelings and asking how they are attending to their own self-care, goes a long way toward easing the burden and frustration that COVID-19-related limitations have imposed.

Stated another way, acknowledging that these families are experiencing real *grief* during this time of social isolation, gives validity to their emotions. Let us support, thank and honor all families and all caregivers on this journey of uncertainty.