

Golden Girls and Sunshine Boys: Making Those Tough Elder Care Decisions

It was a comedy of errors.

Eighty-five-year-old Nat couldn't understand why his nursing home phone bill would show that he made over 900 calls in February. After all, he had used the phone just four times that month, to call his sixty-one-year-old son Marty at home to complain about Stan, his crazy roommate. "No," Marty tried patiently to explain to his father, after examining the bill provided by the front office, "you didn't make 900 calls—you made more than a dozen calls to a 900 number." What was worse, it was one of those x-rated 900 numbers advertised in the back of adult magazines. Still, Nat couldn't understand what was going on, for as he had already explained to his confused son, he had used the phone less than half a dozen times, and those were all local calls.

After a little more investigation, Marty discovered that it was crazy Stan, his father's mysterious roommate, who was using Nat's phone to make those curious calls whenever Nat was playing cards in the rec room.



For senior citizens and their families, the elder care experience is fraught with stories like that, some bizarre, some distressing, some frustrating, some worthy of television sitcoms and cliffhanger serials.

Certainly there are many unavoidable problems that keep quite a few families from enjoying even a single episode, particularly with seniors who are seriously ill or cannot understand why they are being thrust into situations with which they are no longer comfortable or familiar. That's when it's rarely a "comedy" of errors, or a comedy of anything, for that matter. But when approached with a degree of calm, understanding, appreciation for the inherent challenges, and a desire to do a lot of homework first, it can have a relatively happy ending. By any measure, elder care is a serious and often melodramatic business.

ominous, so highfalutin' and pseudo-chic. But biofeedback is simply information about biological processes given to people under the theory that when they are more aware of these processes, they can use such methods as raising or lowering body temperature or increasing and decreasing heart rate to achieve desired positive effects.

In fact, information pure and simple is one of the best methods toward a successful program of stress relief. Nutritional changes are often cited as one of the richest sources of relief, and there are nutritionists at nearly every hospital, in private practice, and even at some of the larger health clubs to help with individually tailored programs.

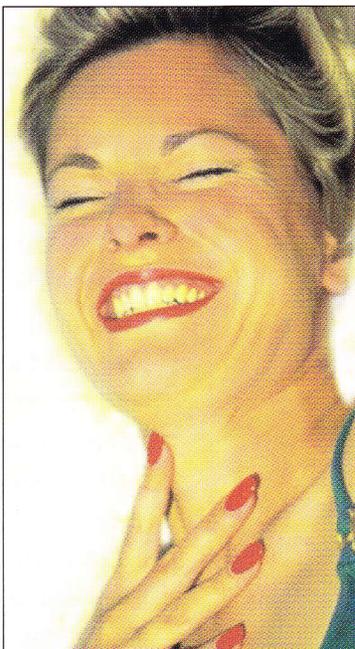
And information about physical exercise is also of great value. Exercise has been proven to take tense energy and redirect it to better use for all vital organs (the brain being one of them). Exercise lowers blood pressure and decreases blood levels of fat and cholesterol, all of which can improve heart function. People are less stressed when they are less worried about their health.

Group therapy, hypnosis, acupuncture, and even music can also be effective methods of stress relief. (Well, not *all* music).

As shown, hospitals are also very involved in matters of stress, although in many cases, they are being proactive in creating facilities and procedures specifically to eliminate the stress of patients who are there for stressful reasons in the first place. At Valley Hospital in Ridgewood, the Robert & Audrey Luckow Pavilion has been built as a comprehensive cancer and same day service center that also includes an image salon, resource center, and a series of support groups, all of which have been designed, at least in part, to relieve stress.

Breathing Easier

By any measure, stress is a serious business. Even most day spas and some health clubs require clients to fill out health information sheets so that the proper procedures are administered in the proper ways. That's for their protection as well as ours. Often, too, what some may regard as stress can actually be something more severe. Sleep disorders and anxiety, for example, can be serious problems, and people need to realize that such maladies require the attention of trained medical specialists.



"Unfortunately, the link between sleep problems and cardiovascular disease is too often ignored by patients and healthcare providers," warns Dr. Richard Goldweit, Director of Interventional Cardiology at Englewood Hospital, and director of its Center for Sleep and Cardiovascular Health. Signs of potential problems can range from chronic snoring to pauses in breathing while sleeping, and Dr. Goldweit and his staff continue to explore ways to educate the public that these and other signs, such as daytime sleepiness and fatigue, are risk markers that may require evaluation and treatment.

Anxiety disorders are also frequently misunderstood. Panic attacks, phobias, obsessive-compulsive behaviors and post-traumatic stress, according to experts in the field, need to be more fully understood by the people who exhibit any symptoms before they self-diagnose themselves as being merely "stressed."

There is a lot of help around. In addition to spas, clubs, hospitals, private practitioners and information resources, there are many associations, programs and screenings in which people can participate, most of which are regularly listed in local newspapers. Communities like Closter and Rockleigh offer free hypertension screenings at town halls and public libraries from time to time. The Women of Smoke Rise recently sponsored a program called "Relax, Restore, Renew," which covered relaxation exercises and stress reduction (in addition to makeovers and wardrobe analysis). Other towns throughout Bergen County have similar events.

One of the most important things of all in dealing with stress is to have a positive attitude. A positive attitude (technically called Visualization) may not lead to success right away, but it will make the road there decidedly less treacherous. And right up there with a positive attitude is humor. It is a well-established fact that laughter is one of the best medicines not only for stress, but also for illnesses and many other problems in our day-to-day lives. Over at The Fountain, laughter and a sense of humor are among the staff's primary assets and tools, asserts its director, and clients respond enormously well to it. And that's good in a county like Bergen, where going to a stress reduction workshop on Route 17 can take much longer than the session itself is scheduled to last.

To Admit or Not to Admit

Our senior citizens—or for the more politically correct crowd, seasoned citizens—face many serious issues when the time comes for some sort of professional care to be considered. In fact, emotional issues can surface well before that decision is actually made, even as early as retirement. Many older people mistakenly view retirement as a confirmation that the important roles they performed in life are no longer important—and therefore, neither are they. Furthermore, when their schedules and even their surroundings become more or less managed by others, their loss of friendships, income, even sexuality, may be felt deeper than ever before.

When families admit that these potential problems exist, new and better roads to dealing with them may begin to open up.

Of course, there are those who will simply refuse to go anywhere. “My father is 87-years-old, and I felt it was necessary to consider assisted living facilities, nursing homes, a retirement community—*anything*,” recalls market researcher Mary Dwyer, whose father has lived in Fort Lee for many years. “But he simply does not want to move out of the house.”

Instead, Dwyer hired a professional caregiver to spend a few hours at home with her father in the morning to prepare him for the day, and to then return later in the afternoon to make dinner and get him ready for bed. Admittedly, her father’s case is not severe; he can look after himself for all those hours in between. “Though there are still some negatives,” Dwyer adds. “Although he’s still in the house he loves, he doesn’t have much interaction at all with other people his age.” Social interaction can be very important to the mental and emotional health of our senior citizens.

Nevertheless, Dwyer’s situation does point out that caring for the elderly need not be limited to just two or three options. In addition to conventional nursing homes and the residential home care for which she opted, there are also many different kinds of independent and assisted living facilities, social day care services, medical day care, retirement communities, and even an increasing number of hospital-sponsored programs.

The option also exists to let our elderly parents live in our own homes, the pros and cons of which can provide hours of discussion and debate. Many people do it, many others won’t even consider it. It must be noted that in many cases, the children of the elderly are getting older themselves and may have some problems of their own. Also, sometimes the expense of providing assisted living for the older people in our lives competes with the cost of college education for the younger people in our lives.

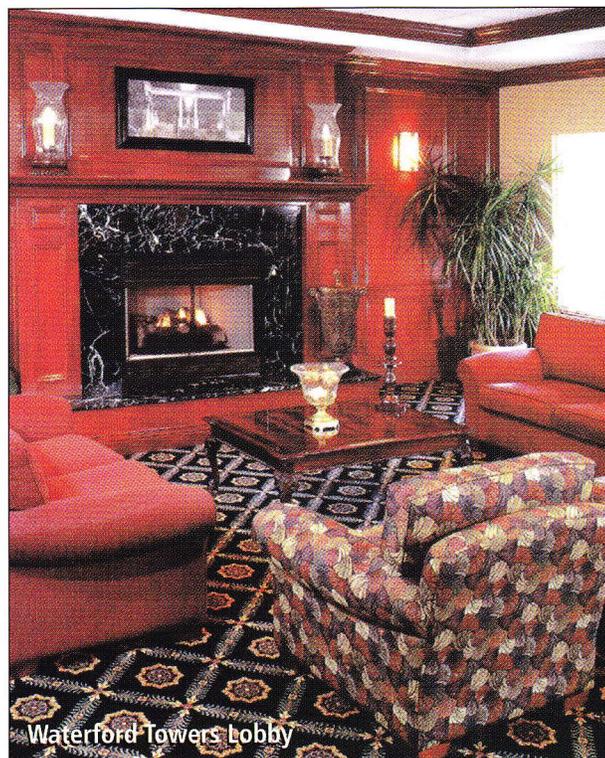
Talk about cliffhangers!

A Network of Programs

There are about 32 basically traditional nursing homes in Bergen County, and even the most cursory review of just a few will show that there are as many similarities as there are differences. For example, the number of available beds ranges from less than 20 at the Highland Manor in Allendale to over 250 at the Oakland Care Center in Oakland. (There are benefits to both extremes). Most accept Medicaid and Medicare, a small handful are exclusively privately funded, and by virtue of its charter, the New Jersey Veterans Home in Paramus, operated by the New Jersey Division of Veterans Healthcare Services, has certain benefits and restrictions

that the others do not. Some nursing homes are family owned and maintain quite a bit of individuality and privacy, such as the Dellridge Care Center in Paramus. Others, like the Wellington Hall Care Center in Hackensack, aligns itself extensively with local hospitals and social organizations to take advantage of their programs, as well.

Of all the facilities for those who need only minimal care, Waterford Towers in Edgewater may not only be one of the most active and progressive, but perhaps the tallest, as well. With two 14-story buildings, Waterford is a landmark in independent elder living. “People take care of themselves and are responsible for their own bills, their own shopping, and their own medical care,” explains publicity director Joyce Celia. “But as every resident knows, our staff is there to help in order to make it as easy as



possible for them to be truly independent. Our residents' families know it, too, which is one reason why so many families seek us out."

In fact, facilities like Waterford Towers actively encourage family participation, with such amenities as parties with clowns and games for the younger grandchildren during all the holiday seasons.

Prime Time

Hospitals are implementing more programs of their own for seniors. Seniors, of course, represent a large and important local demographic with which hospitals would always like to maintain good relations. Valley Hospital in Ridgewood is one of those with just such an array of programs. "We are the only hospital in Bergen County with a program like Prime Time," explains Colette Cummings, Director of Gerontology Services. Prime Time is a free health and wellness program for adults aged 54 and older. "Our department was created specifically to offer specialized services to the older adult population in the county. We educate them on medical issues, as well as topics of interest to them. We get them involved and help them learn while having fun. We give them a place and a program to call their own."

Not far away, Englewood Hospital and Medical Center has several Caregiver Support groups, according to spokesperson Barbara Ettington. "Most of our patients are over the age of 65," she says, "and the community's demographics show that the elderly population is our fastest growing segment. Every program we offer is, therefore, offered for the elderly."

Englewood recently contracted with a service called Lifetime

Connections to provide security for its elderly patients and others living at home but lacking the mobility required to reach the phone for medical emergencies. Once a patient is a member of the program, they receive a "Lifeline" device to wear around their neck or on their wrist that, when pressed, activates a special telephone that can be used up to 100 feet away. A trained responder on the other end questions the patient to determine what's wrong and then contacts all appropriate medical personnel, including family members and neighbors.

Common Sensibilities

One of the most difficult things about the entire process is picking the right method of care and then, if applicable, finding the right place. "We needed a facility that would give my mother the proper care and also be in a convenient location," says Ellen Wagman, a Manhattan businesswoman whose mother is now in a nursing home in Bergen County. "We visited about five places when we were searching. The one we chose was not nearly as modern as some of the others, but it seemed personal and caring, and the people who lived there seemed as if they would have things in common with my mother."

Wagman's view—that the place you choose should be based less upon the way it looks than upon the people who live there—may not be the most popular view in the world, but it does have the support of many. Colette Cummings at Valley Hospital adds a professional spin of her own. "There are so many things to consider," she says, "from the experience, flexibility and demeanor of the staff, to the areas of specific expertise of its medical personnel."

The word 'institutional' is one of those stigma words that sends shivers up the spines of elder care professionals—not to mention seniors and their families. In the past, it has been used to describe everything from decor to demeanor to food. Many facilities go to great lengths now to wipe the word out of the elder care vocabulary, particularly places like Waterford Towers, which features a full dining room run by the former staff of a now-defunct top-rated restaurant, The Palisadium. Waterford further avoids the stigma through its other in-house amenities,

For those electing any type of care facility at all, here are just a few of dozens of additional considerations, according to a series of experts and others interviewed for this article. Many of these are obvious, although often overlooked. Most are just plain ol' common sense:

- Does the facility have its license or certification up to date?
- During your fact-finding visits, do many residents seem over-sedated?
- Do residents have sufficient privacy?
- Can closets or drawers be locked in which personal items are kept?
- Is there good lighting for reading and walking?
- Is there plenty of sunlight?
- Are there hand rails and grab bars in the halls and in the rest rooms?
- Are there religious services on site?
- Are residents allowed to have private physicians?
- Are medical professionals available at all times?
- Under what circumstances would patients be sent to a hospital solely by management decision?
- Are there trips regularly planned to cultural events?
- Are there discussion groups and other clubs?



Waterford Towers Dining Hall

such as a beauty parlor, bank, spa, card rooms and much more. "We try to foster a sense of community, because that's what seniors really need," says Joyce Celia. "And if someone comes to us and is all alone, they won't be alone for long."

No matter what kind of facility is ultimately chosen (if that's the route you choose, rather than home care or hospital-sponsored programs), you should feel free to tour the place as extensively as you'd like. You may even ask to see the kitchen. Food quality and sanitary standards do often reflect the level of health care and enjoyment its residents receive. If your tour guide refuses to answer a question or gives elusive answers, be wary. Also, other people's opinions come in very handy. It isn't only physical health that's important.

"We view older adults holistically," shares Valley's Colette Cummings, "and therefore provide programs that address their medical, social, mental, spiritual and cultural needs. We understand that the needs of older adults may be different than the needs of the general population."

The Name of the Game

Everyone needs to grasp firmly what Cummings and her team has already mastered: from the availability of certain magazines to the preparation of certain foods, even the littlest things can be of great importance to our seasoned citizens.

Choosing the proper place may indeed be difficult, but reaching the decision that our elderly mothers or fathers (or both) need such care in the first place is sometimes even tougher. As many people discover, not every senior will easily admit to needing care, especially when they have to move to a strange new place to get it. "The hardest part of all was convincing my mother that she needed full-time care," Ellen Wagman says. "Also, my mother, being in the early stages of Alzheimer's, didn't entirely understand what was happening—and not understanding made her very unhappy."

Situations like that are exacerbated when sons and daughters

face certain hard realities of their own, such as the fact that someone who has loved, raised and nurtured them is deteriorating before their eyes. Also, it is sometimes very hard for us to face our own unwillingness (or inability) to care for our parents ourselves.

And once the decision is made and the care begins, there is no guarantee that a laugh track will accompany every scene. Often it's no one's fault. "My visits were uneventful and unrewarding," Wagman adds, "only because my mother's condition made it that way. In fact, most of the time she didn't even realize that we were there."

It can become especially tough on all involved when the need to discuss wills, power of attorney and other such legal matters become necessary. "We try to educate the public on the need and benefit of having an 'advance directive' for elderly parents," shares Barbara Ettington at Englewood Hospital, referring to items such as living wills. "With an advance directive, a person's health care decisions can be respected even when the person is unable to communicate those decisions."

Fortunately, most elder care facilities do offer enough assistance and background to help in making informed choices. People may also contact the Bergen County Department of Health Services at 201-599-6100 or the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services at 609-984-1863 for further data, as well as the Better Business Bureau or various other local and state agencies for news, information or background checks. (Bergen County also operates the Bergen Health Care Center in Rockleigh, a social and medical day care center which offers non-restrictive, cost-effective, long-term care, although space may be limited. They can be reached at 201-599-6100).

Taking the Credit

At the end of *The Sunshine Boys*, the 1975 movie starring Walter Matthau and George Burns, one of the crotchety ex-vaudevillians discovers that the other one, with whom he hasn't gotten along in forty years, will be moving into the same elder care facility where he is now residing, the Actor's Fund Home in Englewood (based on the actual place). Only our imagination will tell us how the two octogenarians, Al Lewis and Willy Clark, eventually get along. Of course, in *The Sunshine Boys*, when Al and Willy have a comedy of errors, Neil Simon is right there to smooth things over and make us laugh at their problems, all the way to that wonderful and sometimes elusive happy ending. In real life, we're more or less on our own—so it's up to us to write the best script we possibly can.