

Small Steps Toward a Safer Home

By Nan Hayes for Caring Transitions[®]

Moving from a family home to a Senior Living Community is a pretty big deal and is one of the more significant lifestyle changes made by older adults. In truth, though, most seniors remain in their homes where they have the opportunity to make smaller, yet equally important changes to their environments. As seniors go through certain “care transitions” due to changes in health, agility and mobility, there is often a resulting “home transition.”

[Age-in Place](#) home transitions may include major remodels or revisions to modify a home such as; adding ramps, widening hallways and reinforcing walls for grab bars. Other repairs and modifications may include updating electrical outlets, replacing light switches with rocker plates and replacing traditional faucet handles with levers. Simple projects such as downsizing, decluttering and organizing may also serve to make the home a safer place.

Seniors, their children and caregivers can start to identify safety and repair issues by performing a series of “Assessments,” which include:

1. Environmental assessment,
2. Fall assessment and
3. Home safety check.

[Caring Transitions](#) professionals can help family members with home safety assessments. Additional evaluations may be necessary to determine if an older individual is suffering from problems with their stability, gait, cognitive ability or senses. Those assessments should only be performed by qualified medical or geriatric care professionals.

Getting Started

Adult caregivers often express worry about their parents’ safety, but often don’t know how to approach the subject. We recommend a direct approach, where the older adult can be engaged in conversation and provided an opportunity to express their personal concerns. Sometimes sharing an article like this can help generate such a conversation. Remind parents that you want to talk about safety and that your objective is not to make them uncomfortable in their home, but to help them stay in it longer. Start by asking the parent what THEIR safety concerns may be as you walk through rooms of the house.

Typical hazards, such as frayed power cords, sharp corners, slippery throw rugs, poor lighting, steep or narrow stairways and lack of support bars in bathtubs and bathrooms should be addressed as soon as possible.

Decluttering

Most professionals who work with older adults are familiar with the dangers of living in an overcrowded or cluttered home. Much of the danger is from tripping and falling, risks that are summed up in the latest Center for Disease Control (CDC) “Older Adult- Fall Risk Overview”. According to the latest report, over 2 million older adults are treated for accidental falls; about one quarter, or 500,000 of those are then hospitalized and about 20,000 die annually. The chance of being moved to long-term facility is five times greater for older adults who suffer from a fall. Of course, a cluttered home also creates other perils such as risk of fire, infestation or illness due to dust, mold and mildew.

Families often know they need to declutter, but many times we will hear: “I know I should get rid of it. I just don’t know what to do with it all.” Or, “I will just take care of it when I’m ready to move.” Or, “I like my things and just can’t think about letting anything go right now.”

Our answer, “start now and start small.”

Organizing

Begin today. If for no other reason, start now because it is on your mind. Managing clutter is something most of us prefer to ignore or put off, but it has a way of catching up to us when we have even less time and patience to deal with it. Too often we witness clients caught up in a medical crisis or preparing for home sale who belatedly then have to deal with rooms full of clutter and chaos.

When you start decluttering or organizing, begin with one small space (a stack of newspaper, a drawer, a closet shelf, a corner of a room) and limit your work effort to that space until it is less cluttered. Have bags, boxes and labels handy to donate, store, toss or recycle items. It is best to schedule a small but reasonable amount of time for decluttering and then stop when time is up. Schedule more time the next day and so on until you have completed that area and then move on to the next.

So much of clutter is memorabilia and collectibles. These items are important to us, but take up an awful lot of space. One solution is to take pictures of them then box them up for storage, donation, or sale. Of course, photos also take up room and can add to clutter quickly, so consider a [digital service](#) to consolidate and post all your pictures, film and slides online for the whole family to enjoy.

Large Furnishings

Stand in the doorway and look into each room. Are any entries and exits blocked? Are sharp corners of tables and counters in the way? Is it difficult to navigate the room smoothly without stepping over or around items and furniture?

If you answered “yes” to any of those questions, it may be time to consider a furniture donation to your favorite housing charity, moving something to consignment, gifting an item to a relative or perhaps putting a few pieces up for sale through [online auction](#).

Sometimes newly opened spaces may make individuals uncomfortable but typically within a few days the adjustment will be made and the changes are no longer noticed.

If you are an adult child working with a parent, be sure you include them in any discussions regarding the sale of their furnishings. Too often we forget our parents’ rights in our zeal to “help.” Also keep in mind; everyone has their own idea of what “organized” really means. Our homes don’t necessarily have to look like something off the cover of a magazine, just safe and comfortable.

About Caring Transitions

As life changes, it may become necessary to leave a familiar home and part with personal belongings in order to downsize and relocate to a smaller home or retirement community. At Caring Transitions, we help our clients understand the process, evaluate their options and make informed decisions that suit their best interests. We are committed to making each client’s experience positive by minimizing stress and maximizing results.

Visit us online at www.CaringTransitions.com.

Call Caring Transitions for a Consultation – (800) 647-0766

Christopher Seman, President of Caring Transitions

10700 Montgomery Road, Suite 300

Cincinnati, Ohio 45242