

What You Can Expect From a Great Assisted Living Community

1. A clean, safe place where needs (big and small) are addressed promptly: "I feel heard."

Making sure your loved one is safe and receives prompt attention trumps the list. The best communities draw top-quality staff and keep communication open. In the words of one caregiver, they're "easy to contact and never hesitate to call if something needs to be discussed."

It's when everyone goes out of their way and takes the time to do the little things that matter. Places where food requests are accommodated or have "a chef who knows how to make the food sing." Places where, as one family member said, the staff is "considerate and dependable, no matter when I call."

2. Homey touches: "It feels like home."

No one wants to feel like they're living in a hospital. Assisted living communities have come a long way. They feature special touches: manicured grounds with flower beds, gazebos and ponds, inviting décor, and "spacious, well-maintained living spaces." Where living spaces reflect residents' personalities -- like the community where "residents had several of their personal belongings displayed, such as photographs and figurines." "Placing a loved one here will help me sleep at night," one visitor said of a two-time five-star community in his area.

3. A trustworthy staff and active residents: "It feels like family."

Trusting that your loved one is receiving good care is vital, and there's nothing like being greeted by name. These are the places where "you can feel the love when you walk in the door." It's important that your loved one find new friendships. "Several residents stopped and talked to us. It was nice to know that my grandma wouldn't have a problem meeting people" is how one granddaughter expressed it.

4. Great amenities: "I feel like I'm on vacation."

You're in for treat when it comes to amenities. Assisted living communities now offer video, audio, and book libraries; computer rooms; and classes on everything from digital photography to scrapbooking. If you're into fitness, you can swim, golf, and even take a "laughing yoga" class. And don't think you're stuck in one place: After visiting a friend at her community, one reader said, "We walked the trails that lead to the park in the back. We ate lunch in the dining area (food was great) . . . then took the facility bus ride half a mile down to the mall for shopping."

You're likely to find whatever you're interested in, whether it's offerings of beverages and light snacks; or easy access to nearby shopping, museums, music venues, and restaurants.

5. Family-friendly atmosphere: "I feel like my family and friends are always welcome."

It's tough to place your loved one in a care community, so finding one that's family-friendly helps assure you that your loved one will stay connected. "Family involvement is encouraged, and there are special family nights several times during the year, with live music, festive decorations, and a beautiful buffet," one family member said of her experience with a loved one's assisted living community. Life is sweeter when you're able to invite a friend for lunch, and when your grandchildren and even the great-grandparents get to visit often. Some assisted living facilities send out invitations to special events and celebrations; you can even reserve a room for birthdays and other important gatherings.

Before choosing an assisted living community, gather as much information as you can!