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Senior Downsizing Tips: When to Push, When to Let the Clutter Be

Clutter sometimes piles up in an aging senior's house, and adult children and caregivers often start pushing seniors to downsize. That may or may not be a smart move, depending on the safety of the house and the health of its owners.

The following senior downsizing tips will help you start a conversation with your loved one, manage your expectations and emotions, and avoid damaging your relationship in the process.

The Emotional Side of Senior Downsizing

Whether the goal is helping a senior with downsizing or simply some decluttering, the situation is delicate and the stakes are high. Here are emotional perspectives to consider when planning a conversation with an older adult who is struggling to manage their clutter.

- **Consider your motivations.** Ask yourself: Am I doing this for Mom, or is it really about me? If Mom has immediate health problems and is legitimately endangering herself by being alone on the farm, that's one thing. However, if she's 92 and you're fretting that she just bought five more bags of yarn that she'll never knit into sweaters, that may not be worth your worry.
- **Tread lightly.** Any senior's possessions have emotional significance. They are imbued with memories that, when taken collectively, contain the story of a life. Thus, in Dad's eyes, if you imply his things are worthless, you've effectively judged him as worthless. Pro tip: Inviting Dad to tell the story of old photos and/or objects as you clean or pack can help ease his anxiety and assure him he's still valued.
- **Respect your parents' vulnerability.** Nine times out of ten, senior downsizing or decluttering rides on the coattails of a trauma. So, if Mom has recently suffered a drastic change in health status, or has lost her husband of

52 years, you need to be especially gentle, as this is the least “in-control” she’s ever been. When you approach her, speak in a soothing tone and don’t get frustrated. Remember: This is about her, not you.

- **At the end of the day, the stuff is just stuff.** Getting into a heated debate about clutter or too-much-house isn’t worth jeopardizing your 50-plus-year relationship with Mom. In our experience, while Boomers tend to plan ahead and look forward to downsizing—which makes talking easy—Greatest Generationers are a different animal. Shaped by the Depression and World War II, if you try to force or bully them into moving against their will, or do a surprise clean without their consent, they can and will begrudge you. Sometimes to the grave.

When to Push a Senior to Downsize

One big tip for senior downsizing is that the earlier you talk with your parents about their estate, the better. Ideally, make a plan five years before senior downsizing or in-home care becomes necessary. However, if the house is cluttered to the roof and you’re super scared or addled with anxiety, the right time is now. Here are two tips for pushing effectively:

- **Leverage health or safety experts.** Whether it’s the onset of dementia, a dual hip replacement, or whatever, having a healthcare professional or social worker initiate a move or cleaning is optimal. Here’s why: It lets you be the good guy. You’re no longer the one forcing Dad to uproot himself and abandon the life he worked so hard to create, you’re the daughter who’s helping him deal.
- **Build in options and “choice.”** If safety concerns force you to push a senior to downsize without an official decree, offer her two options. For example, ask Mom to choose between two different assisted-care facilities to move into. The choice will help preserve her sense of control and personal dignity, and stave off possible depression. Pro tip: If you hold an estate sale, insulate Mom from the figures. For her, the amount her former possessions sold for will invariably fall short of expectations, and could trigger a negative valuation of her life.

When to Let the Clutter Be

So you’ve mentioned downsizing or decluttering, and maybe even pushed, but no dice. Your elderly parent doesn’t want to budge, or even talk about it. Your

expectations may have suffered a blow, but don't let that sour your relationship with Mom or Dad. Here's how to face the situation with grace:

- **If they're physically able to stay, let them.** Remember, this is about Mom. If she wants to stay and can do so, don't fight her. Your worries aren't worth trashing the last five to ten years of the relationship, nor what she perceives as her quality of life. And don't get pushy. In one instance, after a client blindsided his father with a move, Dad refused to speak to him again. Ten years later, when Dad died with the grudge still in place, he left nothing to the son.
- **Do plan ahead for eventual senior downsizing.** Keep in mind, health issues could lead to a sudden move at any time, so have some options lined up. Meanwhile, with hired in-home care, you can lessen your share of the caregiving burden. In-home care can potentially enable Dad to live out his days in the comfort of his own home—and at a cost cheaper than assisted living. Research your options and plan ahead.

If you are thinking of senior downsizing, you already know that waiting to discuss the issue won't make things easier. Whether it's downsizing, cleaning, or simply finding out what Mom and Dad want to do with their stuff, it's absolutely appropriate to start talking, and planning, now.

At **WayForth** we work with families in transition due to events such as downsizing, moving to assisted living or the death of a loved one. We can empty an entire house within days, sorting what items to keep, sell, donate, and discard. Our goal is to minimize a family's stress while maximizing the value of the estate. Call us for a free consultation 1-866-616-9708.

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