

Creating Rewarding Lifestyle Changes

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I recuperated from polio at age 12 and was able to walk with only a slight limp for most of my adult life. However, some 55 years later, post-polio syndrome was limiting my activities more and more due to decreases in my mobility, strength and endurance. I had to use a cane when not at home and a mobility scooter for longer distances as well as taking rests during the day. I became more housebound, especially in the winter due to my fear of falling on the snow or ice, or due to my inability to climb stairs.

My new lifestyle required me to slow down and to adapt to my physical changes. I came to grips with these changes slowly after some psychological counseling and with the emotional support of friends and family.

Almost five years ago, my husband and I realized we were no longer able to maintain our large house and yard. The kitchen required 10 to 15 steps between the sink and the refrigerator or between the sink and the kitchen table. The master bedroom was five rooms and a hallway away from the laundry room.

There were steps from the garage into the house, so unloading groceries was tiring. The storage areas were down in the basement, some in crawl spaces, which was extremely difficult for both of us to manage. My husband's back problems and my difficulties with walking also interfered with our doing yard work and gardening.

Although we loved to entertain our family, some of whom live out of town, we had to admit that it was overwhelming to host large gatherings and especially to function as a "B and B."

It was time to change our residence and our lifestyle.

We discussed how we should make our own decisions about where and how to live independently PRIOR to having a health crisis that would force us into less-desirable decisions. We started looking at various types of senior living communities that included lawn care and

snow removal. It didn't take us long to find an ideal situation for our stage of life, being in our early 70s with a desire for social and intellectual stimulation.

We did not want to live in an apartment or a condominium, so we were delighted to discover that a Del Webb seniors housing development was under construction not too far away. We quickly chose a 2,200 square foot, two-bedroom ranch-style house to be built on the lot of our choice.



Our house

We planned accessibility adaptations to the model home including grab bars and raised toilets in the two bathrooms, wider doorways in the hallways and relocating the refrigerator so it would be closer to the kitchen sink.

Our monthly fee is reasonable for all we receive including yard and snow services, indoor and outdoor swimming pools and lots of social and learning activities at the community lodge. Our new home made it seem like we would be on a perpetual vacation with more time for fun and less physically-taxing work.

It didn't all happen easily, of course. Major change never does. Downsizing required us to spend several months dealing with all of our accumulated "stuff." We spent lots of time sorting, discarding, selling, reorganizing and

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planning – both emotionally and physically challenging tasks – but well worth the results. We kept our motivation up by focusing on the positive aspects of our chosen new lifestyle.

When sorting our belongings, we continually asked ourselves, “What do we want or need to take to our new house and where will we put it?” Our motto became, “When in doubt, throw it out – or donate it to a charity.” Despite all the work, difficult decisions and fatigue, we finally got settled into our new home just in time for the holidays.

The first event we attended with other people in our new community was a lovely Christmas dinner party. We were greeted warmly when we arrived and sat with friendly folks during the evening. That broke the ice. I soon decided I wanted to get more involved with activities at our community lodge. I began participating in events that would expand my horizons mentally, strengthen my body physically and bring satisfaction to me emotionally.

First, I decided to try one of the exercise classes at the pool. I knew I should be doing more exercise to keep from losing strength and endurance. I discussed the water aerobics class with the instructor and told her about my limitations. She encouraged me to adapt any of the exercises to my own abilities. She assured me that everyone in the class is very supportive of each other and that other participants also have physical difficulties.

I now attend this class for an hour twice a week on a regular basis. I discovered that I’m more flexible afterwards and have fewer joint pains. In the summer months, we use the outdoor pool where the sunshine and resort-like ambiance make it even more enjoyable.

Soon after getting settled into our new home, I began carefully reading the monthly newsletter for other activities in our community that seemed interesting and mentally stimulating. The book club was a “natural” for me and they welcomed me instantly as a new member. I found I got to know people easily in this small group. I’ve read books I probably wouldn’t have known about otherwise and have expanded my horizons greatly by discussing them. Attending lectures or classes on various topics has also stretched my mental abilities.

I decided to join the Glee Club. We practice every Saturday morning and give two popular performances each year as well as outreach programs at local nursing homes. Participating in a choir helps me feel energized and making music is spiritually uplifting.

Many other activities are available at the Lodge. I’m especially appreciative of how easy it is to park and enter it in the winter due to consistent removal of snow and ice. It is so much easier than attending events at public buildings with inadequate disabled parking or at private homes with stairs. I attend more



The Lodge

events now, knowing I can arrive safely and without becoming overly tired.

Being with people I enjoy has increased my inner strength. I began reaching out to new people in our community at social events and during creative activities which have kept my spirits high. For example, my husband and I have enjoyed attending the annual Memorial Day recognition of veterans at a flag-raising ceremony followed by a huge buffet breakfast.

Over time, it has been increasingly rewarding to be a “joiner” and to extend myself beyond my previous pursuits. I often attend events on my own, but there is also a social group for single people which is very popular.

All in all, moving into our active seniors’ community has been one of the best changes in lifestyle I could have made at this time of my life. At last I’m not the only person who has physical limitations. I’m finding that lots of other residents have health issues, too, which is why they moved here! No one pays attention to how differently I walk or that I use a cane.

I’ve also learned to ask for help when I need it. I’ve accepted the fact that I cannot be totally self-sufficient and strong. It is not a weakness to accept this need to change and adapt.

Change is hard, but I’ve also learned it can be so very rewarding. I love this new lifestyle of being involved with like-minded people, living in a welcoming and supportive community, and participating in activities that enhance my mental, physical and emotional well-being. It has given me a new lease on life! ■

Suggestions on How to Downsize

Beverly Schmittgen

Think positive thoughts about the future. Your upcoming move is an opportunity to create a simpler, more satisfying lifestyle. Avoid emotional attachments to “things” from the past. Remind yourself that spending time with people and activities that you enjoy is far more important than having lots of possessions.

Talk with your children/heirs about which items they would like to have now. Schedule a time for them to come and remove these items from your home ASAP! Other items that they would like in the future can be listed in your will. This is a good time to do or revise estate planning.

Schedule adequate time to plan and sort through possessions over a three-month period prior to moving. I spent lots of evenings going through a couple of boxes of “stuff,” such as old photo albums and memorabilia that I inherited from my parents. We also had toys, games, costumes, art supplies and musical instruments for our grandchildren’s entertainment that were no longer needed now that they’re grown up.

We scheduled several days during the week to go through cupboards, closets, the garage and basement to sort and discard, or donate, all of the things we no longer needed or were out-of-date. I forced myself to make quick decisions and not ponder these choices. We filled up garbage cans with lots and lots of these things for trash pick-up.

Be ruthless in discarding memorabilia you’ve saved for years! Only keep a representative sample of old photos and collections. My daughter suggested we take a photo of a keepsake and then give it or throw it away. That way I still have the memory. I suggest removing old photos from their frames, labeling them on the back and putting them in a cedar chest or similar long-term storage box. Ask yourself if your heirs will want these items or not. When in doubt, throw it out or give it away!

Plan which furniture you will take to your new home and where it will fit. This requires measuring all the rooms in the new house and your current furniture, determining where TV, phone and electric outlets are, and calculating how much space you’ll have for storage. We added extra shelves in closets, the laundry room and the garage to maximize storage in our new basement-less house. I created a schematic map of our new house and where the furniture, TV’s, computers and phones would be placed. This was extremely helpful on moving day.

Sell valuable and larger items such as furniture, equipment, coins, artwork and antiques. Get help advertising and selling items on Craig’s List. Contact an antiques dealer or auctioneer who is willing to come to your house to evaluate items they might be able to sell or to auction. Be willing to negotiate reasonable prices. Remember, you are saving yourself time and effort by letting others do the selling for you.

Get ready for a huge garage sale. Sort all the useful everyday stuff you haven’t used in several years and decide what you might be able to sell at a garage sale. This especially applies to items from your kitchen, garage and basement. Keep in mind that the prices you ask will need to be very low. Advertise with yard signs, ads in the newspaper and on Craig’s List. Get help with organizing, setting up and selling on the days of your sale. Fall and spring are the best times for garage sales.

Donate, donate, donate. It is especially helpful to decide to donate a great deal of your usable items to charitable organizations that can use or sell your “stuff” to benefit people in less fortunate circumstances. Save receipts and use the donations as a tax write-off. We found churches in areas of high poverty that would pick up some of our things, or we delivered items to them and to Salvation Army drop-off centers.

For example, I donated costumes to a local community theater. Historical items were a little more challenging. I contacted various historical societies and delivered doll collections, my father’s military items and papers from his years as a school administrator as well as my mother’s wedding dress and photo. It did take extra time and planning to arrange for appropriate donations, but it made me feel good to “do good” for others.

Focus on the future! No matter what age we are, we need to have rewarding activities to look forward to and friendly people to socialize with. The benefits of changing one’s lifestyle to make it more manageable and fun far outweigh the work involved in moving or the ease of “staying in place.” My mantras were to ask for help, keep motivated, take rests and be adaptable. ■