



# How to Alleviate the Stress of Moving for Older Adults

By Margit Novack

“There are certain experiences—childbirth is one; moving is another—that nature and time definitely draw a curtain on, so you forget in between times how painful they are.” Katherine Graham, famed publisher of the Washington Post, wrote this famous quote in her Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir, *Personal History*. Most people believe that the joy of having children makes the pain of childbirth worthwhile, just as most seniors who relocate are happy with the outcome as well. Moving allows these seniors to enjoy a new life that often includes better opportunities for socialization, stimulation, improved nutrition and exercise—all important aspects of thriving as we age. But let’s not sugarcoat the truth: moving is tough for everyone, but it is toughest for elderly adults.

## What is relocation stress syndrome?

Over the past two decades, increasing attention has been paid to relocation stress syndrome (RSS), which is also known as transfer trauma. RSS is a formal nursing diagnosis characterized by a combination of physiologic and psychologic disturbances that occur as a result of transferring a person from one environment to another. Symptoms of relocation stress syndrome include exhaustion, sleep disturbances, anxiety, grief and loss, depression and disorientation. In seniors, these symptoms are exacerbated by dementia, mild cognitive impairment, poor physical health, frailty, lack of a support system, and sensory impairment. For these seniors in particular, the resulting confusion, depression and agitation have led to increased falls, undesirable weight loss and self-care deficits.

Although initial studies on RSS focused on outcomes of individuals moved to nursing homes and assisted living facilities without their involvement or consent, it is now generally understood that RSS can affect those who have chosen to move, been involuntarily relocated, or been placed in a care facility for mental or medical needs.

## What You Can to Help Offset Relocation Stress Syndrome (RSS)

Studies have shown that certain actions are successful in minimizing RSS. These actions, which can be undertaken by family members, are all hallmarks of senior move management. They include:

- Involving the senior in the decision and planning process.
- Providing the senior with an opportunity to ask questions and discuss his or her concerns.
- Honoring the individual’s preferences and allowing him or her to maintain control.
- Paying attention to details and maintain the senior’s daily routine as much as possible.
- Safeguarding the senior’s personal possessions.
- Involving the senior in setting up the new room or apartment.
- Making the new home resemble (as much as possible) the old home.
- Helping the resident become acclimated.

It is not surprising that seniors do better after a move when they are involved in the decision, have an opportunity to voice their concerns and be heard, and are able to maintain a sense of control. Anyone, regardless of age, would do better under these circumstances. The problem is: seniors often don’t get this opportunity. Well-meaning family members may make decisions on their elderly loved ones’ behalf, not soliciting or listening to their concerns, or simply need to move the seniors faster than they can handle. In short, family members often focus on the details of the move rather than on the person who is moving.

## How Senior Move Managers Can Help

Few things speak as urgently about the benefit of using a senior move manager when relocating an elderly adult. Let the senior move manager handle the move; he or she will involve the individual and honor any preferences (it’s what senior move managers do). This allows family members to focus on what they do best: attending to the needs of the person in transition, maintaining his or her routines and helping the senior become acclimated to the new environment. Nothing can entirely remove the pain of relocation, but this team approach helps everyone focus on what is truly important.

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