

A close-up photograph of two elderly hands, one on the left and one on the right, clasped together in a supportive grip. The skin is wrinkled and aged, and the background is a soft, out-of-focus white surface. The hands are positioned symmetrically, framing the central text.

# Rejoining Their Journey

GRACEFUL REENTRY INTO THE LIVES

of our senior family members

**Melonie Tindall**

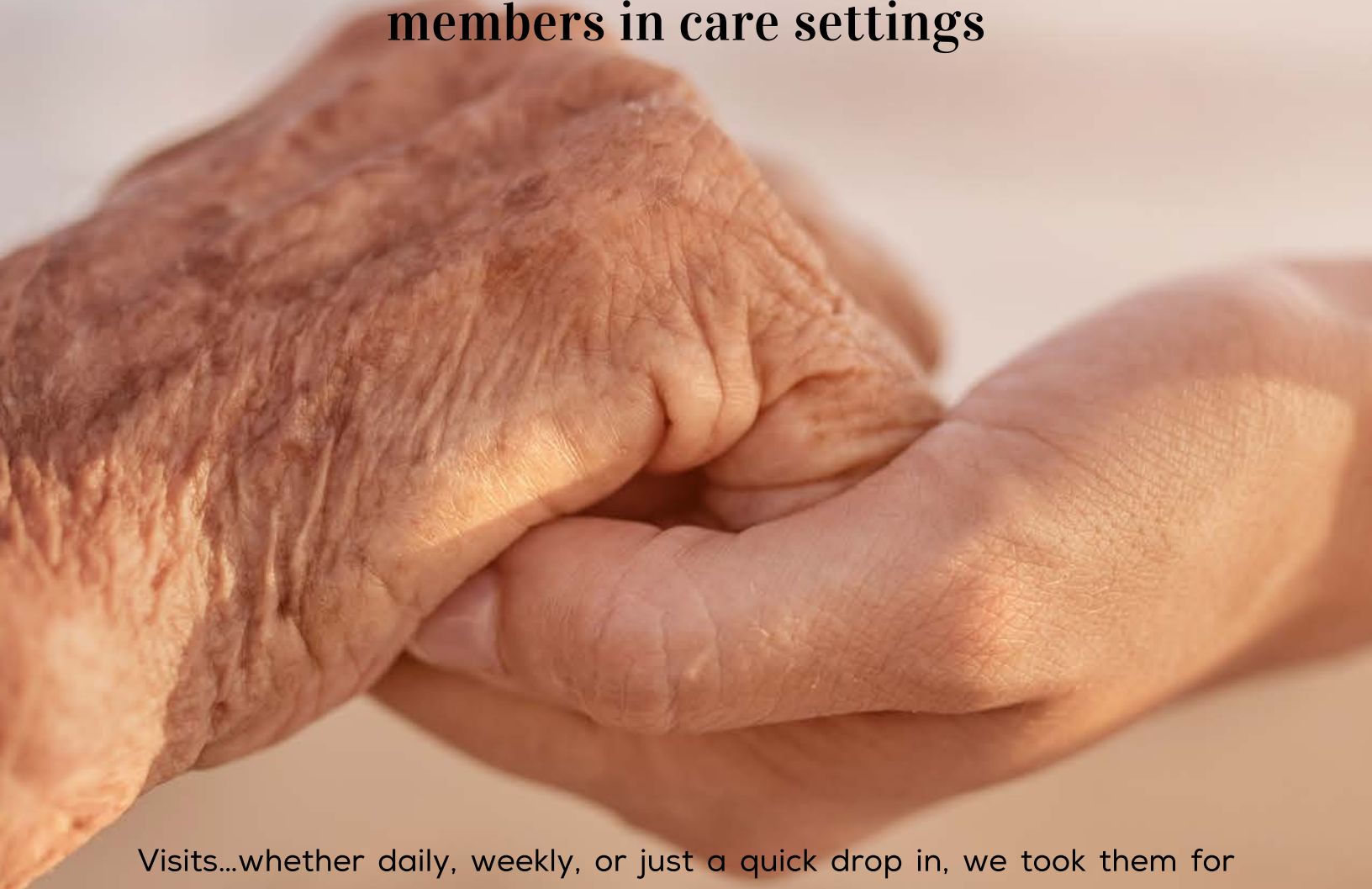
**BA, CDP, CADDCT, Certified Alzheimer's Specialist**

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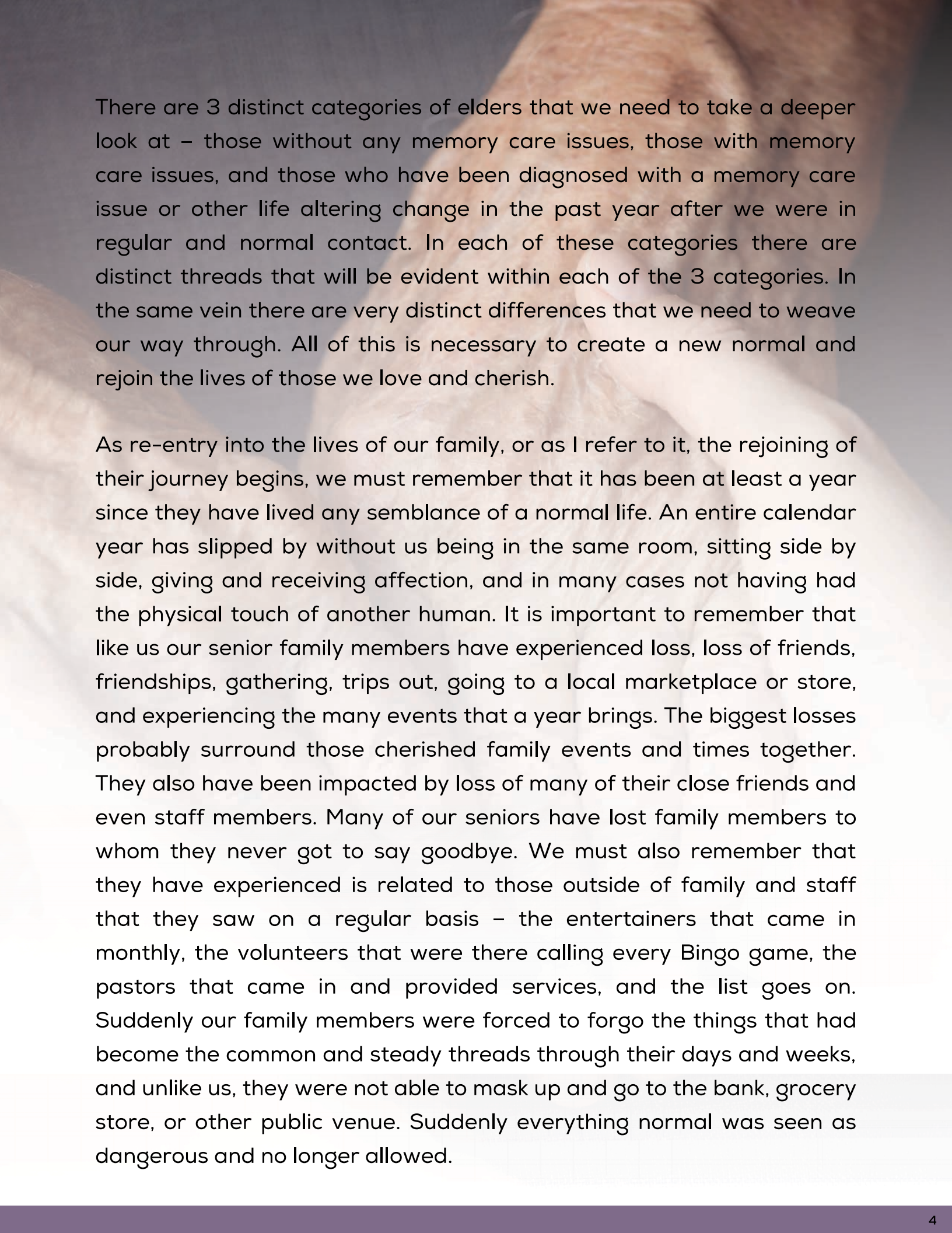
**Graceful reentry into the lives of our senior family members in care settings**



Visits...whether daily, weekly, or just a quick drop in, we took them for granted until about a year ago. Then suddenly with a blink of the eye and a newsflash from the CDC and local health departments, we were banned from spending time with those we love so dearly. Gone were the days of just stopping by to say hi, share a hug, take an unplanned car ride to the countryside, or the other things we took for granted. We suddenly were separated in a way that felt like death.



Our loved ones became increasingly isolated and forced to live within the 4 walls of their tiny living spaces. No longer could they visit with their friends and co-residents at a meal, commiserate the day gone by, or just enjoy an activity in a group setting. Many of our senior family members could not comprehend the strict new rules and regulations placed upon them to quickly and cruelly and loneliness and resentment began to set in. Behind the scenes so many loving caregivers made an attempt to fill in the gaps of missing family visits, but nothing could replace the visit of a husband, wife, daughter, son, grandchild, cousin, friend, or neighbor. We have all anxiously awaited the long overdue and promised reunions and now the realities of the separation will have to be faced head on. Each of us are hoping that past year of window visits, video chats, and all the other non-personal visits will only be seen in a rear-view mirror. However, that is not promised even with the vaccine and safety precautions that have been put in place. This handbook is designed to help with overcoming concerns and in many cases uncertainties of the upcoming re-entry into the lives of those we love and look toward a more normalized life.

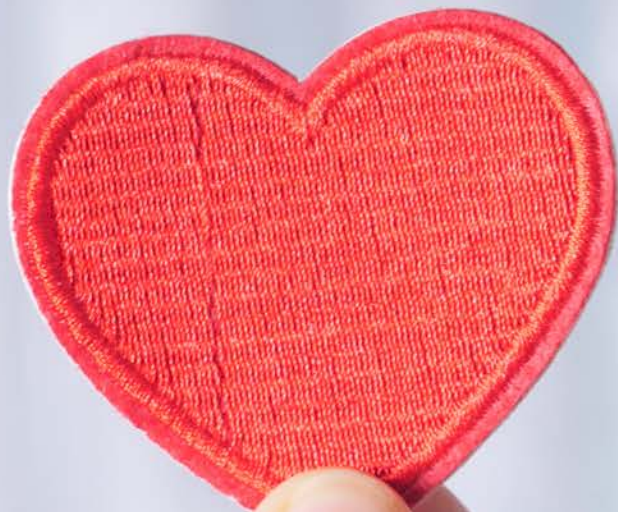


There are 3 distinct categories of elders that we need to take a deeper look at – those without any memory care issues, those with memory care issues, and those who have been diagnosed with a memory care issue or other life altering change in the past year after we were in regular and normal contact. In each of these categories there are distinct threads that will be evident within each of the 3 categories. In the same vein there are very distinct differences that we need to weave our way through. All of this is necessary to create a new normal and rejoin the lives of those we love and cherish.

As re-entry into the lives of our family, or as I refer to it, the rejoining of their journey begins, we must remember that it has been at least a year since they have lived any semblance of a normal life. An entire calendar year has slipped by without us being in the same room, sitting side by side, giving and receiving affection, and in many cases not having had the physical touch of another human. It is important to remember that like us our senior family members have experienced loss, loss of friends, friendships, gathering, trips out, going to a local marketplace or store, and experiencing the many events that a year brings. The biggest losses probably surround those cherished family events and times together. They also have been impacted by loss of many of their close friends and even staff members. Many of our seniors have lost family members to whom they never got to say goodbye. We must also remember that they have experienced is related to those outside of family and staff that they saw on a regular basis – the entertainers that came in monthly, the volunteers that were there calling every Bingo game, the pastors that came in and provided services, and the list goes on. Suddenly our family members were forced to forgo the things that had become the common and steady threads through their days and weeks, and unlike us, they were not able to mask up and go to the bank, grocery store, or other public venue. Suddenly everything normal was seen as dangerous and no longer allowed.

The 3 most looked forward to events of the day – breakfast, lunch, and dinner with their tablemates suddenly was no longer acceptable and they were forced to eat alone in the small room they called home. Meals were delivered to them on a cart pushed past their room by a staff member with every type of PPE the facility could get their hands on. Meals were served on disposable paper products and after they received their meal they were forced to sit on the edge of their bed or at a small in room table alone. In many cases this brought back memories of a lost love years ago. Our family members were unable to move about the communal living setting and walk through the friendly and familiar hallways. Those who had loved ones in another part of the community no longer could walk through the double doors to sit and caress the hand of a wife or husband as they shared a meal. Rather they had to rely on staff to let them know how their spouse of 50 years was doing and, in many cases, only to hear that their loved one no longer was eating enough and was beginning to slip further into their dementia. As the months marched on, some were able to use technology and video chat with a loved one on the other side of the great barrier door. The loneliness and isolation have in most cases taken a toll and understanding the new norm is still outside the realm of understanding for those seniors. Our elders experience of this pandemic will be completely unique and unfathomable to each of us. Their experiences, changes, losses, and forced new lifestyle will have its own evolution in who they have become. They will not be the same people that they were last year, and we must accept the changes that have come and embrace where and how they experience life now.

In the following pages we will be taking a deeper dive into the 3 categories of elders that we are starting to rejoin the journey of. It is important to remember that both understanding and love will be what speaks the words we may not be able to express and will reach into the heart of those we do dearly love.





## Seniors who do not have memory loss

As we stop and reflect on why our loved ones moved into a communal living setting, we must embrace the reality that nothing this past year has been what they were “sold” or signed up for when they agreed to give up their home. Different people express these challenges in different ways. Many of our loved ones may have a false believe that it was just “their” community that was so drastically locked down. The isolation and inability to understand the bigger picture has in many cases created a false sense of reality and what truly has gone on in the world around them. Many of our loved one’s harbor resentments because of what has had to happen to them during the very expended lock down. The loss of socialization is unbearable, and the resentment has built. We can not expect them reacclimate to the new normal in the same way we have had to. Because they already are living in somewhat of a social bubble, they may never grasp or accept the reality of the changes our world has experienced.

During the time that they have been isolated, they have experienced loss in their own ways – loss of freedoms, which many of them fought for, loss of friends and family, loss of normalized day to day activity, along with so much more. In many of the scenarios that we will experience, our elderly parents have lost family members that were unable to see, say goodbye to and grieve. What might feel like a long overdue visit for those of us going back into their home, may be the first reminder of the child or spouse that they never were able to say goodbye to or see again. We must accept that we as outside dwellers cannot understand the fear and loneliness they have lived in for the past year. The key to rejoining their journey is the acceptance of not being able to completely understand or embrace what their reality has been. No amount of trying to say you understand is ever going to resonate with them. For those of us who were not confined to a communal living environment and have lived in our own homes, it is important to remember that we at least had some freedom of movement throughout our homes, the ability to get into a car and go for a drive, or walking into a grocery store and we cannot understand the dread of waking each morning and not being able to socialize or touch another human who is just a few feet away. Imagine for a moment that you, like your loved one, for the past 365 plus days only saw the people you loved most through a small screen/video or through a piece of glass. When trying to communicate on a many times foreign electronic device, they could not experience the typical body language that accompanies conversations, and in many cases had difficulty hearing or seeing the person on the other side of the screen.



In many cases, they had to get on a list to place or receive a call from anyone, and there was a limited time for them to chat. If the friend or relative was not available when the call was placed, they many times had to wait days to try again. Window visits offered the same limitations. For those of us waiting our turn to be in the cue for the visit seemed unimaginable, just imagine being on their side of the same equation and being told that because there are so many people trying to visit and they can only be done at certain days/times, and only getting to visit a couple of times a month for a very limited 10 - 15-minute timeframe. To put this in perspective remember that inmates in our jails system have a more robust visitation in place. Without the normal interactions that make us who we are, many of our family members have lost much of themselves and what makes them who they are to us. Some have become depressed and had to face other difficult medical changes alone and without the love and compassion of us being able to be by their side.





It is important to remember that the person you left on your last visit has aged in place and has experienced the grace of growing older by at least a full year. So, be prepared for the physical changes that will be a part of the new experience. When visiting through a window or video call, you must remember that you are not seeing the entire picture. The changes may be subtle, but they also could be very pronounced. It is important to remember that they have been living with these changes, and to them they are no longer new or different. However, to you the child, spouse, friend, etc., they could feel very unsettling. Depending on how much information you have received through out the last year from facility staff you may have a sense of shock when you see your loved one in real time and up close for the first time. Embrace the changes – you only have this lifetime to enjoy their presence. So, sit back, relax and enjoy each and every minute of the time you spend together.

## Seniors who have experienced life altering or memory changes during the past year

While we have been removed from our loved one's lives they have aged and changed. Isolation in and of itself can create cognitive decline. In some cases, just the process of aging creates changed memory and recall patterns. Some of our senior family members may also have experienced a medical event that caused a change in their normal mentation.





No matter the reason, it can be jolting the first time you visit and experience the “new” losses in the person you know and have loved your entire life. Having walked away a year ago from someone who seemingly was alert, sharp and on top of life, and then to walk back in months later to someone who no longer remembers things the way they did in the past can create a huge sense of loss in the family. Many times, an elderly loved one who has experienced these losses may come across with intonation of anger or frustration and vent those feelings out toward your best placed gestures. A long-awaited visit can become a hostile experience due to no fault of either party. A loved one who may have never lashed out, might suddenly lash out in ways that you have never experienced before, or, shut down and be unwilling to interact with you all the while you are making your best attempt at re-entry into their life. Suddenly care staff and other facility personnel seemingly have better rapport and relationship with your loved one. You may have a sense of not being wanted or needed and feelings will well up within you. It is important to remember that those staff members and other facility personnel have been the only faces and people that your loved one has interacted with for months on end in real time and in person. The ability of someone experiencing memory loss to connect the dots as to the who and why is not something they can do. It may take time for them to warmly accept your presence and reentry into their world



Many times, you will have to make your entry back into the world of your loved one more slowly than you had hoped. They need the time to process the newness of what is going on and who you are. Their minds in many cases, may have conjured up many a story about why you have seemingly disappeared, what your relationship to them is, and why you are “suddenly” trying to be a part of their lives. It is not uncommon for someone in this stage to twist your best efforts into a perceived attempt at an attempt on your part to steal money, lock them away, or take all of their possessions. You may also be misidentified by your loved one as a different and many times deceased family member. As an example, many times a mother will see a son as her deceased husband. Because of the way memory loss can affect the brain, your loved one may be convinced that they are living in a different era. In their mind, since they perceive themselves many times to be much younger, you may appear to not be the age of the child they “know”. If you happen to be a spouse, they may be living in a time before they were married or may have even met you. Do not be alarmed if they are unable to identify and remember the details of who you are in their life. It may take time as you start to re-emerge into their life. Giving space, time and grace is necessary as you reapproach and enter the world they now know.

Typically, as you begin your regular visiting schedule, this will dissipate, and you will be able to move toward more meaningful visits. It is so important to remember that this is in no way a reflection upon you or the inability of you being able to see them over the past months. Rather, this is the sad process the disease of memory loss has taken from your family member. Your loved one has no control over the losses they have experienced. Most of the time this loss will produce a time of grieving for you and the memory of who your family member once was. It will be important to take the opportunity to learn more about any new medical information and to start to ask questions regarding any new medications that have been added to their daily regimen that might create a greater loss of memory or other side effects such as delusions, hallucinations, loss of mobility, etc. It is more important than ever to ensure that you are a part of the decision-making team and that you are not just accepting that meds have been layered onto existing medications. Make sure that whomever your loved one has identified as the decision maker is incredibly involved. Be alert to altered mentation, changes of activities of daily life, and any other different or unusual patterns you may notice. Many times a second opinion is extremely important. Speaking to a medical professional familiar with your loved one's previous baseline is always encouraged. Make sure that you are armed with all the new diagnosis, medication changes, or other relevant information. Never allow the facility or physician to make decisions without your knowledgeable consent. We need to be the best advocate for our loved ones – we know them, we know who they have been, and what their deepest wishes and desires have been. Do not back down until you have what you need to be fully informed and able to make reasonable and informed decisions.

## Seniors who have had pre-existing memory care issues prior to the pandemic

For those who have loved ones with an already existing memory care issue, you are all too aware of the ups and downs and the bumps in the road. There are never 2 days the same, and changes can occur rapidly. Now you have not been a part of the changes for many, many months and it may be shocking the amount of decline your loved one has experienced. Depending upon the trajectory of how the decline or loss of memory has previously run its course, you may feel that it has been expedited during this long period of isolation. You are probably correct – isolation and change in patterns of living can cause memory issues to be more pronounced. We all know that elders with memory loss can have changes in memory status day over day or seemingly go months without any noticeable changes.

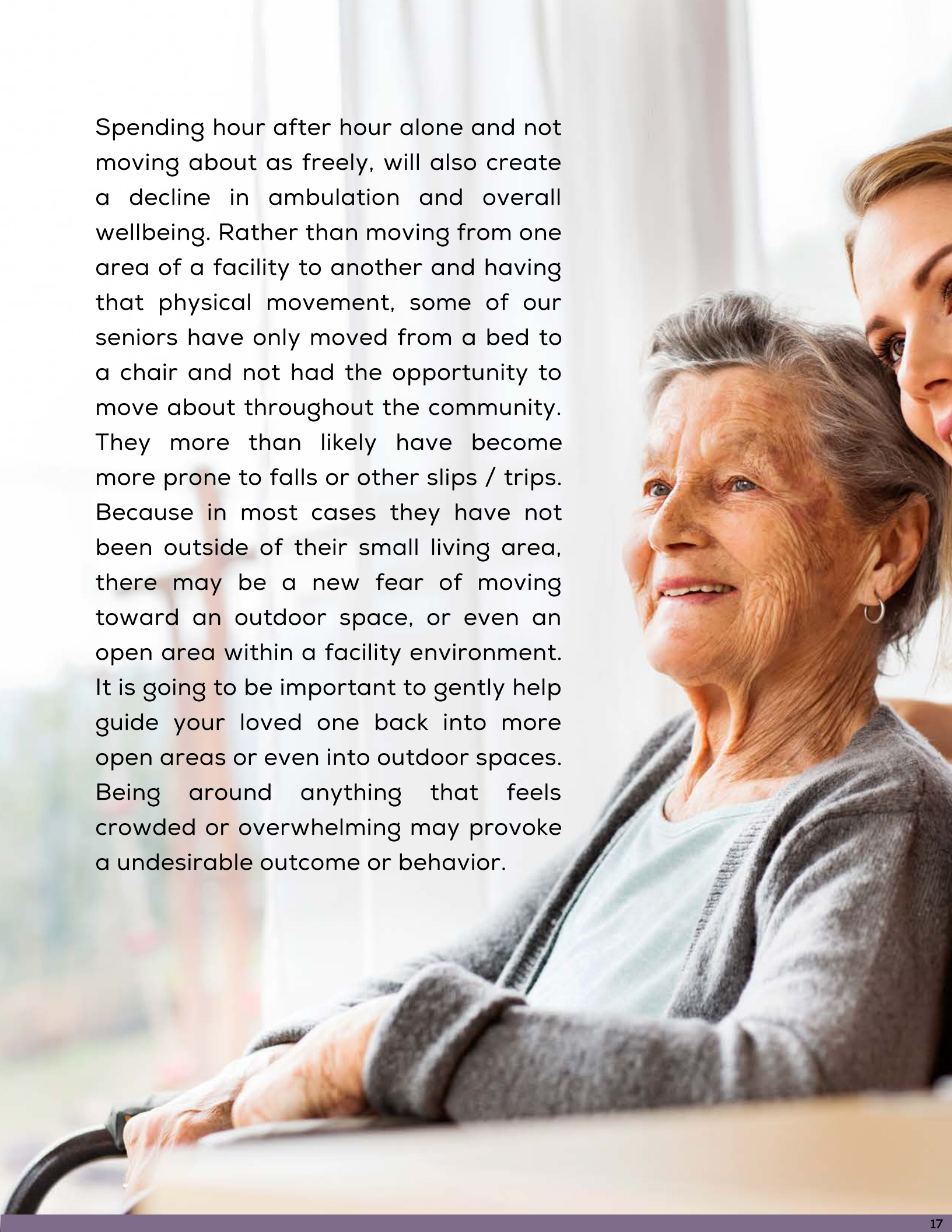




Each person is different, and each story is different. However, as we are each aware, isolation and loneliness can exponentially change how this disease progresses. Your loved one may have become withdrawn or visibly depressed. Their ability to communicate in the way you are accustomed to may have been altered. Language skills may have begun to slip and familiar communication methods no longer viable. They may have experienced a loss of mobility and functional status during the time of you not being a part of their daily life. A loved one that has never experienced extreme sadness or depression earlier in their experience, may now be exhibiting signs of depression and withdrawal. Weight loss many times becomes another prominent issue that presents with loss of relationships. Meals that typically were a social event, in many cases have been moved to a “table for one” event and the loneliness ensues. The desire to eat many times declines and even the taste of the food no longer is welcoming.



Spending hour after hour alone and not moving about as freely, will also create a decline in ambulation and overall wellbeing. Rather than moving from one area of a facility to another and having that physical movement, some of our seniors have only moved from a bed to a chair and not had the opportunity to move about throughout the community. They more than likely have become more prone to falls or other slips / trips. Because in most cases they have not been outside of their small living area, there may be a new fear of moving toward an outdoor space, or even an open area within a facility environment. It is going to be important to gently help guide your loved one back into more open areas or even into outdoor spaces. Being around anything that feels crowded or overwhelming may provoke a undesirable outcome or behavior.





Many times facility staff have not taken the time to keep you fully updated with all of the small changes that have occurred over the past numbers of months of separation and you may be taken aback by what you see upon a full in person visit. This is all apart of the changes that your loved one has gone through. However, it is once again important to ensure that you are aware of, and able to advocate on behalf of your loved one. Do some digging and make sure you know what has gone on, what providers they have seen during tele-med visits, any changes in medications, etc. Small changes can invoke larger problems. Do not settle – stay inquisitive and in charge. We are all aware that decline is what the path ahead involves. Do not blindly walk the path – your own sense of something that does not feel right, may be right on target. Advocating for those who cannot is the job of the person/s that has been given the responsibility to act on the behalf of the senior with memory loss or decline.



Part of rejoining their journey, is arming yourself with both knowledge and fun. Included in this handout are numbers of ideas of activities you and or other family and friends can do with a senior who has been isolated for many, many months. So, sit back, enjoy the journey and do everything you can to rejoin where they are at.

If you would like more information about the topics discussed, please feel free to reach out. I can be reached at [Melonie@PremierSeniorServices.Org](mailto:Melonie@PremierSeniorServices.Org) or by calling **720-315-1039**. We offer online support groups that you are welcome to inquire about. Visit our website to see the many services we offer including care management and planning services. I look forward to hearing from you.

# Activity Ideas

## FOR SUCCESSFUL VISITS

- ☐ Friendly chat by a fireplace or flowerbed
- ☐ Puzzles – depending on cognition level these can be very simple or complex
- ☐ Brain games that you can play on an electronic device or in a bound book
- ☐ Painting – either free style or craft style
- ☐ Read a favorite book aloud together
- ☐ Reminisce old time rhymes or other poetry
- ☐ Devotionals and other religious literature that can be shared
- ☐ Card games
- ☐ Watch a movie together – bring along popcorn and snacks to enjoy
- ☐ Create a family memory scrapbook together
- ☐ Share recipes - writing them down on recipe cards
- ☐ Share videos from the past year
- ☐ Make voice clips of family that may be too far away or unable to visit
- ☐ Have an indoor picnic with all the fixins
- ☐ Bring a box of old photos to go through and enjoy reminiscing times gone by
- ☐ Go to the beauty shop together
- ☐ Have a girls “spa” day
- ☐ Get your nails done together
- ☐ Bring a favorite coffee/tea and pastry or other treat they may not have not had recently

- Sit and enjoy some favorite music
- Plant a small indoor window garden
- Bring some yarn and knitting needles/crochet hook and start a project
- Bring fabric squares to start a new quilt or other sewing project
- Set up a bird feeder outside a window
- Bring a small special meaning gift
- Bring a bingo game or play an electronic version
- Redecorate a room and by adding a few new pieces of décor
- Update a bathroom with new towels or other fun additions
- Update their bedroom with a new or well-loved comforter/bedspread from days gone by
- Change out seasonal clothing and add a couple of new pieces
- Play a favorite board game
- Just sit and enjoy a well-loved tv program
- Do some online shopping together
- Bring some flowers (real or silk) and make an arrangement
- Go for a walk
- Bring the favorite family pet for a much overdue visit
- Update favorite perfumes, colognes, aftershaves, etc
- Sort out old makeup or other toiletries that may need changed out
- Go for a car ride
- Bring in a favorite milkshake or go and get an ice cream cone
- Facetime or video chat with a family member or friend that they have not seen
- Bring some stationery and stamps for them to write letters and mail
- Attend an online dance class

- Take a Wii and have some fun competition
- Create and research your family tree
- Make a family time capsule
- Start a Facebook page
- Create a mosaic
- Do some birdwatching
- Armchair travels – many can be found online
- Set up an In room herb garden
- Create a memory box
- Add some bling to a newly acquired walker
- Bring a walker bag that can be attached for ease of carrying items from place to place
- For those with more advanced memory issues
  - Take a small box of items to fold
    - Socks that need matched
    - Dish towels
    - Baby clothes/cloth diapers
  - Take items that you can sort
    - Large buttons that can be sorted by color, shape, etc.
    - Old jewelry that can be sorted by type
    - Nuts/bolts or other hardware items
    - Matching fabric swatches or paint chip samples

- Career related items
  - Take an old adding machine or ledger book
  - Briefcase with files/papers
  - Tools/toolbox
  - Wood pieces and fine sandpaper
  - Small pvc pipe pieces and fittings
  - Stethoscope or other small medical devices
  - Other specific memorabilia from a past career
- New purse with a few items that they can enjoy shuffling though
- A wallet or other important item for a pocket – add some old non-important items
- Bring in some fun items to dress up in – scarves, hats, dress gloves, etc.
- Sensory items can help bring back fond memories – lotions, perfumes, etc.
- Old magazines or books for reminiscing (books of knitting patterns, etc)
- Small box of tactile objects or fabric pieces with different colors/textures
- Using an electronic device, watch some live cams of national parks, animals, etc
- Bring in and play simple games they are familiar with

- Provide a stuffed animal that has realistic features
- Bring in a baby doll with some extra clothes, blankets, or stroller
- Watch some past time videos on an electronic device
- Bring a favorite lotion and do a hand massage
- Provide an impromptu manicure
- Enjoy watch some old time sitcoms

If you need more ideas or would like to learn about our monthly activity boxes, please let us know. We offer many different activity-based boxes/baskets that can be customized to your loved one's specific need. Feel free to email [Melonie@PremierSeniorServices.Org](mailto:Melonie@PremierSeniorServices.Org) or call 720-315-1039.

We look forward

TO HEARING FROM YOU.