AGING WITH CARE
When is the right time to downsize?
By Marla Beck

“My aunt and uncle are in their 80s and live outside of town. It’s hard for me to get out to see them regularly, and when I do, I notice that things are not in as good repair or as clean as they used to be.

“I’m concerned that their place is just too much for them. I would like them to downsize, but they are very reluctant. How can I help them?”

Downsize: the very word can open up some difficult territory for elderly loved ones. As a person who is in the unique position of meeting lots of people who are transitioning into old age, I often see the subject of downsizing become a source of family friction and frustration. Quite often, the older and younger generations will disagree on which course of action is best: staying put or moving to a smaller, more manageable place.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution; it’s all about perspective. When you talk about downsizing, your loved one may interpret that to mean that you want them to give up what they love in exchange for a life in an “old folks’ home.” Don’t be surprised if the suggestion isn’t instantly embraced.

Downsizing may seem like the obvious solution to the younger generation; for them, history, familiarity and emotion often take a back seat to what they see as more practical considerations. However, those back-seat items are often the ones driving your elderly loved ones’ decision-making process.

They may not want to leave the home where they raised a family, or perhaps they just don’t like the idea of change. Whatever the reason, trying to convince them to downsize without respecting their experiences and desires is generally a lose-lose situation.

Factors to consider

The decision to downsize often has competing considerations: safety, logistics, finances, history, familiarity and emotions, to name a few. These all need to be sorted through and talked about. Be prepared to see things from your aunt and uncle’s point of view.
Since you are noticing that the yard and household chores are not getting done as well as they used to, it may be time to talk with them about how things are going in general.

Ask open-ended questions. It can be tempting to swoop in and “save them,” but unless they are in imminent danger, I would not recommend that strategy.

Remember, tasks involving control and legacy are part of the developmental stage they are in — respect that. Listen to what they have to say, what they want, and allow them to identify and solve their own problems if possible.

Safety is perhaps the most important consideration and worthy of attention from both the younger and older generations. Are your loved ones able to maneuver safely in their home? Are they able to climb stairs as needed and get to the rooms they use most?

If your loved ones are no longer able to drive, logistics become an issue. They need to assess the ease with which they can get to their doctor, their place of worship, the homes of friends and family, and the shops they need.

You may be able to help them to better understand how their location affects people who want to help them and encourage them to consider how their location may isolate them.

Finances, too, can affect the decision to downsize. This is often a very stressful subject to discuss with family members. Your loved ones may need assistance crunching the numbers to determine what they can and can’t afford.

If you have the knowledge to help them, by all means offer that; otherwise, seek references from trusted friends, relatives and organizations involved in senior advocacy.

**Numerous options**

Today’s seniors have more care options than ever — from aging in place with the help of family, friends and professional caregivers; to continuing-care residences, where they can live as independently as possible while knowing, if needed, more care is available; to skilled nursing homes where they have 24/7 care for serious medical problems. All facilities offer tours, and seeing the options for themselves may help your aunt and uncle clarify which option is right for them.

Just remember, you can take small steps at first to keep them safe, such as hiring a professional caregiver to drive and do grocery shopping and a gardening service to keep the yard up. These services give everyone peace of mind and time to adjust and make a well-thought-out, long-term decision.

*MARLA BECK is the founder and president of Andelcare Inc., which provides in-home eldercare. The U. S. Small Business Administration has recognized Marla Beck as Washington’s 2012 Small Business Person of the Year. Submit questions via e-mail to*