

Finding Memory Care *with* *Confidence*

A Guide for Families
Navigating One of Life's
Hardest Decisions

A resource from Dimensions Living
– Senior Living Above and Beyond®





A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

If you're reading this, you're probably carrying a lot right now. You're watching someone you love change in ways that are hard to name, and you're trying to figure out the right next step while managing everything else in your life. The research. The family conversations. The guilt. The love. Sometimes all of it in the same afternoon.

You're not alone in that, and you're not doing it wrong.

We put this guide together because the families we talk to every day are asking the same questions you probably have: What does memory care actually mean? How do I know when it's time? What should I be looking for? How do I even bring this up with my family?

What follows is our honest attempt to answer those questions; clearly, without pressure, and with the kind of directness we'd want if it were our own family navigating this. And if something raises a question we haven't answered, we're here. That's what Senior Living Above and Beyond means.



— CHAPTER 1

What Is Memory Care — Really?

Let's start with the thing most families are picturing: a locked wing. Fluorescent lights. A nursing home with a different name.

That's not what memory care is, at least not what it should be. And understanding the difference matters, because the gap between that image and what a good memory care community actually looks like is significant.

Memory care is specialized residential support designed for people living with Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia. **Where it diverges from that institutional image is in four things that define quality memory care:**

- 1 A secure, familiar environment that reduces anxiety and supports safe daily movement — designed to feel like a home, not a ward**
- 2 Structured routines that create predictability — because predictability is genuinely calming for someone with dementia**
- 3 Team members trained specifically in dementia care — not just general caregiving, but the communication, de-escalation, and dignity-preservation skills that dementia care requires**
- 4 Purposeful engagement designed for where your loved one is right now — not where they used to be**

Memory Care vs. Assisted Living: *What's the Difference?*

Assisted living supports people who need help with daily tasks – bathing, dressing, medication management – but who can otherwise navigate their days with some independence. Memory care is a more specialized environment for people whose cognitive changes require a higher level of structure, security, and dementia-specific support.

Some communities offer both, with a clear pathway between them. At Dimensions Living, that continuity matters: if your loved one's needs change, they don't have to move to an unfamiliar place. The faces stay the same. The community stays the same. That consistency is part of the care.





— CHAPTER 2

Signs That Memory Care May Be Needed

This is the question most families sit with the longest. And if you're honest, you've probably already been noticing things, small moments, close calls, shifts that you've been explaining away or managing around. That's not denial. That's love doing what it does.

But at some point, the accumulation of those moments starts to tell you something. Here are the signs that families and care professionals most commonly identify – not as a checklist to complete, but as a set of patterns worth paying attention to.

SAFETY HAS BECOME A DAILY CONCERN

- Wandering, or getting lost in familiar places
- Leaving the stove on or forgetting to eat
- Missed medications, or double-dosing because of confusion
- Increased fall risk, or falls that have already happened

DAILY LIFE HAS BECOME A STRUGGLE

- Difficulty with bathing, dressing, or basic hygiene
- Inability to manage finances, appointments, or household tasks
- Significant changes in eating or sleeping patterns

BEHAVIORAL AND EMOTIONAL CHANGES ARE ESCALATING

- Increased agitation, anxiety, or paranoia
- Aggressive behavior that is new or out of character
- Withdrawal, depression, or extreme mood swings

YOU'RE RUNNING ON EMPTY

This one doesn't get enough attention, but it should. If you are exhausted, burned out, or struggling with your own physical or emotional health, that is a signal as important as anything happening with your loved one. Caregiving at the level dementia requires is not sustainable for one person indefinitely; no matter how much you love them, and no matter how hard you try.

When caregiver capacity is stretched to its limit, the quality and safety of care at home is affected. That's not a criticism. It's a fact about human limits, and it's one of the most honest reasons families come to us.

- You are exhausted, burned out, or struggling with your own health
- Your loved one's needs exceed what you can safely provide, even with help
- Family conflict about care has increased and decisions feel impossible
- Your loved one has expressed feeling isolated, unsafe, or unhappy at home



If you're reading this list and recognizing your situation in it, we want to say this clearly: **it doesn't mean you've failed.** It means the level of support your loved one needs has grown beyond what any one person – or any one family – can provide. That is not a reflection of how much you love them. It's a recognition of what they actually need now.

The families who tell us they have the most peace are the ones who made this choice before a crisis forced their hand – not because crisis is inevitable, but because choosing proactively meant they had time to find the right community, ask the right questions, and make a thoughtful transition. That window is worth using.



— CHAPTER 3

What to Look for in a Memory Care Community

When you're comparing memory care communities, it can start to feel like they all say the same things. Homelike environment. Trained staff. Person-centered care. The language is similar because the right ideas are similar. What's different is whether those ideas are actually practiced consistently, on a Tuesday afternoon, when no one is on a tour.

Here's what to look for. And here's something worth saying upfront: trust your gut alongside the checklist. The families who feel most confident in their choice are usually the ones whose rational evaluation and emotional read both pointed in the same direction. If something feels off during a tour, that's information.

CONSISTENCY OF TEAM AND ROUTINE

Consistency is arguably the most important factor in quality memory care. Residents with dementia thrive on familiarity. The same team members, the same daily rhythms, the same faces. When that consistency breaks down due to high turnover or understaffing, residents feel it, even if they can't say so.

Ask the community what the staffing structure looks like. Find out who will be caring for your loved one. Ask what the turnover rate looks like. These aren't uncomfortable questions – a community with strong consistency will answer them confidently. At Dimensions Living, consistent team member assignments are a deliberate part of how we build trust with residents over time.

DEMENTIA-SPECIFIC TRAINING

General caregiving training is not the same as dementia care training. The latter covers how to communicate with someone who has language loss, how to de-escalate behavioral moments with calm and skill, how to preserve dignity during personal care, and how to build trust with someone who may not remember yesterday's conversation.

Ask any community you visit what their dementia care training model looks like, and how it's implemented beyond initial orientation.

ENVIRONMENT AND SECURITY

A well-designed memory care environment reduces anxiety and supports orientation. Look for spaces that feel warm and residential, not clinical. Natural light matters. Secure outdoor areas matter. So does the noise level. A chaotic, loud environment is harder for someone with dementia to navigate.

Look for the small details: personal items near residents' doors, wayfinding cues built into the space, outdoor areas that are secure without feeling like enclosures. These design choices reflect how seriously the community thinks about the daily experience of living there – not just the safety checklist.

FAMILY COMMUNICATION

You should never feel out of the loop. Ask how the community communicates with families, how often, through what channels, and what happens when something changes. Ask what the protocol is for a medical event. Look for a community where family involvement is actively encouraged, not just tolerated.

At Dimensions Living, keeping families informed and involved is part of what Above and Beyond means in practice. The goal is that you never have to wonder how your loved one is doing.

MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

Look beyond the activity calendar. Ask what the activities are designed to do, how they're adapted for different stages, and how team members engage residents who resist participation. Quality memory care doesn't just keep residents busy. It creates genuine moments of connection, joy, and purpose. That takes intention, training, and real investment in knowing who each resident is as a person.





— CHAPTER 4

Questions to Ask on a Tour

Before you ask a single question, spend a few minutes just watching.

How do team members interact with residents as you walk through? Do they make eye contact? Use residents' names? Stop to chat? Or do they move through the space efficiently but at arm's length? A community can tell you anything on paper. What you observe in an unscripted moment is the truth.

Then bring these questions. They're designed to help you evaluate what you're hearing and to help you tell the difference between communities that are genuinely strong and those that are simply well-presented.

One more thing: you may not be doing this alone. If you're touring with a sibling who's skeptical, a spouse who's not sure, or a parent who's resistant, these questions work for that dynamic too. They give everyone in the room something concrete to evaluate together, which is often easier than talking in the abstract.

ABOUT CARE QUALITY

- How is the care plan created, and who is involved in that process?
- How often is the care plan reviewed and updated?
- What is the staffing ratio in memory care, and how does it change at night or on weekends?
- What specific dementia care training do team members receive, and is it ongoing?
- How does the team handle a difficult or distressing moment for a resident?

ABOUT DAY-TO-DAY LIFE

- What does a typical day look like for a memory care resident?
- How are routines established and maintained?
- How do team members get to know a new resident's history, preferences, and personality?
- How do you handle residents who resist care?

ABOUT FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

- How will you communicate with me, and how often?
- How do you involve families in care decisions?
- What do you do when something changes – health, behavior, or care needs?
- How do you handle family concerns or complaints?





— CHAPTER 5

How to Have the Conversation with Your Family

Even when you know in your heart that memory care is the right next step, saying it out loud – to a sibling, a spouse, or your own parent – can be one of the hardest things you’ve done. The stakes are real and the emotions are complicated. Love, guilt, grief, disagreement, logistics, and money can all arrive in the same conversation.

Here’s how to approach it.

START WITH WHAT YOU’VE OBSERVED, NOT WHAT YOU’VE DECIDED

The fastest way to put family members on the defensive is to open with a conclusion. “We need to move Mom to memory care” turns the conversation into a debate before it’s had a chance to begin.

Instead, start with what you’ve been noticing. Specific, observable moments are easier for others to receive than a verdict.

“I’ve been thinking about some things I’ve noticed lately, and I want to talk through them with you. Last week she left the stove on twice, and on Tuesday she didn’t recognize me for about twenty minutes. I’ve been worried, and I don’t think I should keep that to myself.”

You’ve opened a door, not announced a decision.

INVITE PEOPLE IN, DON'T PRESENT A DONE DEAL

Family members who feel excluded from a decision tend to become resisters. Family members who feel included tend to become supporters. Even if you've already done significant research, frame it as "I've been learning about what's available and I want to share what I found and hear your thoughts" rather than "I've looked into it and here's what we're going to do."

ACKNOWLEDGE THE GUILT OUT LOUD

Guilt is almost universal in these conversations. If you name it first, you take away some of its power to derail things.

"I know this feels hard. I've been struggling with it too. It doesn't feel like the right thing to say out loud. But I also know that the situation at home isn't safe anymore, and I think we owe it to [parent's name] to have this conversation."

Naming it doesn't make it worse. It gives everyone permission to feel it without letting it stop the conversation.

IF YOUR LOVED ONE CAN PARTICIPATE, INCLUDE THEM

Depending on the stage of dementia, the person this decision is about may be able to participate. If that's possible, give them that dignity. Their preferences matter, and being included in a decision about their own life is a form of respect. This doesn't mean they have to approve the final choice. It means they're treated as a person throughout the process.

BRING A CLINICAL VOICE INTO THE ROOM

If your loved one has a physician, geriatrician, social worker, or neurologist involved in their care, ask for their perspective in writing or in person. A clinical voice can reduce conflict because it's not coming from inside the family dynamic.

You can also bring information from your research: what memory care provides, what the environment looks like, what the costs are. Making the abstract concrete gives everyone something to respond to.

WHEN THE FIRST CONVERSATION DOESN'T GO WELL

Sometimes it doesn't. A sibling shuts down. A parent gets upset. Someone says something they don't mean and the conversation ends without resolution. That doesn't mean the conversation failed – it means it needs more than one try.

Give it time. Return to it gently, with new information or a different approach. Sometimes the right next step is simply proposing a tour together – not as a decision, but as something concrete to respond to. Seeing a memory care community in person often lands differently than imagining it. That's usually a good thing.



— CHAPTER 6

Understanding Memory Care Costs

Memory care is a meaningful investment, and it's one of the first questions families want answered honestly. Here's what we know: Memory care typically requires more than assisted living because of the specialized staffing, training, and dedicated environment it involves. What it actually costs varies by location, community, and level of care.

We'd rather have a direct conversation about what care costs than leave you guessing. When you're ready, our team can walk you through pricing, available care levels, and how to think about planning for the long term.

Common Ways Families Pay *for* Memory Care

PRIVATE PAY

The most common path; families draw from savings, retirement accounts, investment portfolios, and proceeds from a home sale.

LONG-TERM CARE INSURANCE

If your loved one has a policy, memory care typically qualifies as a covered benefit. Review the policy carefully for benefit triggers and elimination periods

VETERANS BENEFITS

If your loved one is a veteran or the surviving spouse of a veteran, benefits like Aid & Attendance may help cover care expenses.

MEDICAID

Eligibility and coverage vary by state. In Wisconsin, programs like Family Care and IRIS may cover memory care in certain settings. Our team can help you understand current eligibility.

When the Financial Conversation Involves *the Whole Family*

Financial decisions about memory care rarely happen in isolation. Often there are siblings with different financial situations, different opinions about what should be spent and from where, and different comfort levels with what feels like the “right” answer.

A few things that help: getting clear on what resources actually exist before the family conversation (home equity, retirement accounts, any insurance policies), agreeing on a shared source of truth like a financial planner or elder law attorney, and separating the financial question from the care question. They’re connected, but conflating them in the same conversation makes both harder.

If you’re not sure where to start with the financial piece, ask us. We work with Wisconsin and Illinois families on this regularly and can point you toward elder law attorneys, financial advisors familiar with senior care, and the Medicaid programs that may apply to your situation. We’d rather you have the right information early than run into surprises later.





— CHAPTER 7

What Happens After You Choose

The decision is made. You've done the research, had the hard conversations, and chosen a community. And then, often before your love one has moved in, you may notice something unexpected: a wave of doubt. Second-guessing. Grief that catches you off guard, because you made the right call and it still hurts.

That's normal. And it doesn't mean you made the wrong choice.

THE MOVE-IN PROCESS

A good memory care community will guide you through the move-in process step by step. This typically includes a pre-move-in assessment to understand your loved one's care needs, history, preferences, and personality. This helps team members begin building a relationship before the first day. The goal is that when your loved one arrives, they're not meeting strangers.

THE ADJUSTMENT PERIOD – FOR BOTH OF YOU

Moving is hard for anyone. For someone with dementia, a change in environment can temporarily increase confusion or anxiety. While this is a normal part of the transition, a good memory care team will communicate with you frequently during those first few weeks as they actively try to establish routines, relationships, and familiarity as quickly as possible.

And for you – the adjustment period is real too. It's common for family members to feel a complicated mix of relief and grief in those first weeks, to wonder if they should have done something differently, to feel guilty for sleeping through the night for the first time in months. All of that is part of this. The families who navigate it best are the ones who give themselves the same grace they'd give anyone else going through something hard.

Stay in communication with the care team. Ask questions. Visit when you can. The transition period is a time when your involvement matters most.



YOUR ROLE DOESN'T END

Moving your loved one to memory care doesn't mean stepping back from their life. The best outcomes happen when families stay involved. That includes visiting, communicating with the care team, remaining part of their loved one's daily world.

You know your loved one better than anyone in that building. Their history, their preferences, the things that calm them and the things that don't. That knowledge is not just welcome, it's part of the care. A good memory care community will ask for it, use it, and keep coming back to you as a partner.

You Came in Looking for Help. ***You're Leaving With the Right People in Your Corner.***

When you started reading this, you were probably in that in-between place. You knew something needed to change and not quite knowing what to do next. We hope what's here has made that feel at least a little more manageable.

The fact that you're doing this research – reading a guide, asking questions, trying to understand your options before a crisis arrives – matters. Most families don't get here easily. You got here because you love someone and you're trying to do right by them. That's exactly what this is.

When you're ready to see what memory care looks like in person, we'd be glad to show you. A tour is just a conversation – no commitment, no pressure. It's a chance to ask the questions that are still on your mind, meet the team, and see how Above and Beyond feels on an ordinary day.

We're here whenever you're ready.



SCHEDULE A TOUR AT
DimensionsLiving.com