

# Home Alone

*Unfortunately, the sweetness of home can be poisonous to solo seniors*

A growing number of seniors are living alone. Contributing to this trend, which shows no signs of slowing down, are longevity, divorce, mobility of children, and the decline of the multi-generational household. According to a 2005 survey, roughly 40 percent of women age sixty-five and older live alone.

Seniors have a strong preference for living independently. They enjoy the privacy, control, and comfort of their own home, especially if they have a long personal history in the residence. Familiarity, routines, and rituals foster a sense of order and security. The family home contains memories that grow in importance with age.

So strong is the pull to remain in one's home that many seniors continue to live alone long after it is safe to do so. Far from the comforts of home, living alone late in life is associated with a great number of physical and emotional maladies including higher levels of mortality, increased likelihood of dementia, depression, diminished cognitive ability, and even suicide. Seniors living alone are also easy prey for bad characters seeking to take advantage of their diminished capacity. In short, seniors living alone are at risk.

From time to time seniors are discovered living in squalor. It can be a gruesome scene: a senior prone to falling, living in filth, not bathing, not eating properly, and hoarding all sorts of things, including old newspapers and garbage. With such discoveries come questions: How could it happen? Why didn't the senior take advantage of the many available senior housing options that offer safety, security, and human interaction?

The first question is relatively easy to answer: our system of law, borne from the Enlightenment and our forefathers' wish to escape the oppression of the Old World, fiercely protects each individual's right to self-determination. Legally, you can't force a competent person to leave their home unless they are a danger to themselves or others.

To remove an intractable senior from their home requires the involvement of governmental agencies including the courts.

The question of why some seniors refuse to leave their home under virtually any circumstances is more complex. Their home is familiar, they dislike change, and most of all they are afraid; afraid of losing control, afraid that they can't afford the cost of new housing, and afraid that their age-related disabilities and perceived loss of physical attractiveness will make them unattractive to their new housing mates.

---

**Far from the comforts of home, living alone late in life is associated with a great number of physical and emotional maladies including higher levels of mortality, increased likelihood of dementia, depression, diminished cognitive ability, and even suicide.**

---

Jane Hilyer of Oakmont Senior Communities in Livonia reports that prospective residents in wheelchairs and on oxygen are most affected by this last fear. In a Darwinian sense, seniors who have been isolated fear that their social skills have atrophied to the point that they don't fit in the outside world.

Geropsychologists (psychologists who specialize on the psychology of aging) believe that past life events are the foundation of our self image. Physical places like our home trigger memories of the life events that were instrumental in the formation of our concept of self. Psychologists call this concept "attachment to place." Who doesn't enjoy a drive through the old neighborhood and the memories it triggers?

As we age, we are more inclined to reminisce about the past. Reminiscing is

more than just daydreaming; it helps ground us to the present, especially as we age. According to Habib Chaudhury, PhD, Canadian expert on aging: "Reminiscing about our past allows us to retain our self-esteem in the face of declining physical and cognitive abilities, and preserves our self-identity as a foundation of psychological security."

It turns out that people of all ages reminisce, especially when their self image is threatened. In times of stress and uncertainty, such as divorce, the loss of a job, or death of a spouse, we find comfort remembering better times and past successes. By remembering and replaying happier times, we are encouraged that we can again experience happiness, competence, and inner security.

Long-term memory becomes more important for those whose short-term memory is affected by dementia. Loss of memory, hearing, sight, and cognitive ability all affect one's sense of security and self. For these people, reminiscence provides them with a fertile source of memories from a time in their life when they were strong and competent. According to Chaudhury: "Studies have shown that reminiscence increases self-esteem, and reduces agitation, particularly for cognitively impaired and/or institutionalized elderly."

Food, music, and old movies all trigger memories, but one's home has special meaning in that it is autobiographical. We decorate and furnish our home according to our personal taste, and adorn it with things of personal meaning like pictures of family, gifts received from friends and loved ones, and purchases from our travels near and far. Our home is our personal residence because it is personal to us. That might explain why we are "appalled" when we see what the new owners "did" to our old house.

Studies show that attachment to home may be especially important for women who were traditional homemakers. Home is where they cooked, raised their children, and perhaps where their late spouse held forth.

Unfortunately, the sweetness of home can become poisonous to the well being of its lone occupant. Seniors



Mark Accettura

living alone, especially those that don't drive, become isolated and vulnerable. As noted, studies show that social isolation accelerates cognitive decline, paranoia, and a whole host of physical, psychological and emotional maladies. It is at this point, if not well before, that senior housing options like senior apartments, assisted living, and nursing homes must be considered.

There is often a transition period after a move as seniors adjust to their new surroundings. In most cases, seniors are soon much happier enjoying new friends and activities, often coming back to life after shaking off the dulling effects of having lived alone. Objectively, they are much safer in an environment where they are involved and monitored on a daily basis. Health, eating, and hygiene all improve as they make their new living arrangement their home.

Gentle nudging may be needed to encourage mom to leave her home, and she may not be happy with you for a while, but it is well worth the effort. One reluctant and somewhat spiteful resident, after a move to senior housing encouraged by her son, admitted that she was much happier, but "don't tell him."

Looking back, most residents are happy that they made the move. Life and reality moves on. For these same reasons, we are really never tempted to move back to the old neighborhood no matter how many fond memories it evokes.

---

**Contact attorney Mark Accettura at (248) 848-9409 or visit his website at [www.elderlawmi.com](http://www.elderlawmi.com).**