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Hey dad, is that a new shirt? | Opinion

Janette Buechler Special to the RGJ

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As Reno and Northern Nevada welcome more retirees, more families are discovering that memory care is not an abstract issue but a kitchen-table decision. Many of us remember someone who lived with dementia, but often from a distance that kept us from understanding daily care.

That changes when it is your parent.

As the adult child of a father with dementia, my expectations shifted in ways I never anticipated. Accepting a new normal is painful, but it becomes less overwhelming when you focus on what matters.

Several years ago, my 88-year-old father suffered a stroke. We had tried many times to get him to wear an emergency pendant. He had two of them. Later, we found both neatly placed on top of his chest of drawers.

That was my dad: a stubborn aircraft mechanic with no confidence in technology and little patience for anything he did not think he needed. Unfortunately, he was face down in his home for nearly 20 hours before he made it to the hospital.

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After rehabilitation, therapy, medication changes, anger and agitation, we faced the reality we had been avoiding: He needed more care than we could safely provide at home.

The social worker helped us find a memory care facility. Still, I carried every fear you might imagine. Would he try to leave? Would he be lonely? How could my dad, still so much himself, belong there?

Then real life started to teach me.

When we visited, we sometimes found him wearing clothes we had never seen before. Once, he had someone else's eyeglasses on top of his head. Laundry did not always come back exactly as it left, despite my efforts to label everything.

At first, those things upset me. They felt like signs that something was wrong. But then I started asking better questions.

Was my dad safe? Was he happy? Was he engaged? Yes.

Every time we visited, he was listening to music, spending time around people and enjoying cookies and ice cream. He was living the best life available to him.

On tours, I asked about meals, medication, staffing, activities and cleanliness. I watched how caregivers spoke to residents. Then I learned that at my dad's facility, laundry was washed together. I was appalled. But soiled laundry was washed immediately, which kept the building fresh. The tradeoff was that a shirt might go missing.

So I came back to the question that mattered: Was he safe, happy and engaged? Yes. That became my anchor.

What I learned is that expecting memory care to operate like the home you and I live in is unrealistic. Dementia changes the rules. A good care environment is not measured by whether every item stays perfectly in place or whether dad is wearing the shirt we bought him last Christmas.

It is measured by whether the person is known, respected, protected and allowed to live with dignity.

Families should ask questions. We should pay attention. We should advocate. But we also have to learn the difference between what is truly concerning and what is simply part of life in a dementia care setting.

For me, peace of mind came when I stopped focusing so much on the missing shirt and started focusing on the man wearing it.

My dad may not know whether the shirt is his. But if he is clean, safe, cared for, listening to music, eating ice cream and smiling when we walk in, then that is what matters most.

And some days, all you can do is smile back and say, "Hey Dad, is that a new shirt?"

Janette Buechler is the founder of Harbor & Sage LLC, an independent assisted living guidance service in Reno.

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