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Seniors' Needs and Mental Health in Condos

Oh dear, it's that crazy old lady again! We have all been there; comments such as this come from our residents and building staff, but these are comments we must not make. Our objective is to treat everyone fair and reasonably, albeit the challenges we face when attempting to assist a senior with a mental health concern need a softer guided approach. Labelling or using negative connotations does not de-escalate the issue or concerns. This is not the right approach, and training yourself and building staff to refrain from ignoring or dismissing concerns or complaints regarding your residents is never in anyone's best interest. As condominium managers, our objective is to better the lives of our residents, but when it comes to mental health,

we are not typically trained or equipped with the tools required.

Condominium living can be a haven for seniors needing to down-size but are still active in their community, travelling or just enjoying all life offers. Although the owners and residents of condominiums vary, it is critical to identify all the needs of your community as a condominium manager. Condominiums are a community governing and looking after themselves, like a village. Seniors can certainly be more present in our community, in our management office, at the security desk or just chatting with the superintendent in the lobby.

As seniors age, they are not always aware of changes in their needs or

behaviour. Family may not be present to see the changes or be willing to acknowledge the most challenging yet most common mental health ailments in seniors. Whether they are long-standing residents aging along with the building and community, newly moved in to downsize and enjoy the carefree living of condo life, or have been placed by family in a condo as an alternative to a retirement care facility, the challenges as a manager are the same regardless.

Support & Empathy

Condominium managers cannot take on the care of seniors in a capacity for physical or mental health. We all appreciate the challenges of not



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being able to reason or communicate in a manner that can be understood by those that suffer from failing mental health. We need to be patient, understanding and prepared to seek help on their behalf. It is essential to recognize that reasoned or rational conversation may not be possible. Sometimes it is best to acknowledge the concerns, direct the resident back to their unit and then follow up with any emergency contact you may have on file. Avoid causing more distress for seniors suffering from confusion or mental illness. Be supportive and compassionate, but not confrontational or argumentative. Courteously and calmly move the senior to a quiet environment to speak respectfully. Reassuring the resident that you care and are writing down their concerns can assist.

Being supportive and empathetic to their concerns can de-escalate the situation or circumstances at the time. As managers, our primary objective is to ensure the safety of other residents and the property and to reduce risk and liability. For seniors, the most common mental illness is dementia. This illness comes in many forms, but several diseases can cause dementia-like systems. Once again, it is not our role to diagnose but to seek the assistance the senior resident may need to avoid or reduce risk and liability for all concerned. Liability could involve leaving water running, the oven on, a pot on the stove unattended, etc. As managers, we need to be concerned with the potential for fire or floods caused by a senior's mental illness. Neighbours may be worried about banging, yelling or hostile sounds depending on the individual and condition the senior may be suffering. This can be disturbing and very concerning to other residents.

How You Can Help

Assisting your seniors to feel part of the community and determining the needs of the seniors in your building can consist of;

- a. Providing an opportunity to create a community of support for the residents amongst themselves within the condominium can assist in identifying mental health

concerns as they arise.

- b. Involve the community/ neighbours/directors in support groups. Seniors generally enjoy communicating and social activities, which can form part of their well-being. Attempt to get the seniors to meet and know their neighbours and vice versa.
- c. Get to know your residents and identify those who may be a concern or require special attention.
- d. Get to know those who provide the support to your seniors in the event you need to contact them. Ensure you have contact information for family/friends/ neighbours for support.
- e. Communicate with your building staff to ensure all are aware, with the utmost confidentiality.
- f. Put in procedures for daily check-ins by security if staffing permits. For example, suppose a security guard doesn't hear from or see certain residents by noon. In that case, they call and follow up as needed to ensure their safety and potentially the safety of others.

In addition to the above, and as always, document, document, document! Just like all our actions, documentation assists in communicating incidents and support action taken regarding any follow-up with emergency contact individuals. This documentation should include any incident reports from security, written reports or complaints from residents and sometimes contractors in addition to your notes. Follow-up should involve the condominium manager. In extreme cases, when a senior's mental health has become a concern for the resident's safety, neighbours or property, it may be necessary to involve social services or even the police. These cases usually evolve over time or when the family is unavailable to the senior resident with a mental illness. This is when documentation is especially critical.

Contact family members for assistance and support on behalf of the resident and explain the condominium corporation's responsibilities

to those family members. Share the events, incidents and concerns with those emergency contacts. Unfortunately, if the family is not cooperative or has expectations of a retirement home type of service, it may be necessary to seek the assistance of the corporation's solicitor; however, this is rare. Again, documentation is key, including any video evidence that may be available.

Maintain Professionalism

Yes, we do wear many hats as professionals in condominium management, but we are not health care providers or practitioners. As the corporation's manager, we have no authority over individual residents, only the ability to seek out assistance when and where needed.

Be we don't just manage brick and mortar – our true value is in the heart and soul of the service we provide because we wish to make a difference, help people, and maybe make someone's life a little better. Have patience, be kind and have the resources available to rely on in an emergency. No different than having the plumber on speed dial! Find your local municipality support services and health resources; keep these and the family contact information at your fingertips.

Remember, it is not always possible to reason with those who have a mental illness, whether they are a senior or not. Still, it is possible to show compassion, understanding and patience. You are not the "bad guy" for assisting seniors in finding the mental health services they need – you could be the hero. ■

Laurie Adams, RCM, OLCM, is a Regional Manager at Crossbridge Condominium Services Ltd. Laurie has been in the condominium industry for better than 25 years and has held her RCM since 1998. She held a position on the Board of Directors of the Association of Condominium Managers of Ontario (ACMO) from 2013 to 2016. She enjoys sharing her knowledge, expertise, and experiences to better the condominium industry to ensure the service of excellence expected continues to be of the highest priority.
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