

Interview with Nancy Wesson author of *Moving Your Aging Parents: Fulfilling Their Needs and Yours Before, During, and After the Move*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Nancy Wesson, who is here to talk about her new book, “Moving Your Aging Parents: Fulfilling Their Needs and Yours.”

Nancy intuitively combines her education, training, interests, and expertise to create a toolbox of skills and services to take people beyond surviving to thriving. Her work is both transformational and practical. The guidance she gives comes from experience in applying these tools to a broad range of successes in the realms of Business, Feng Shui, Mediation, ADD/ADHD Coaching, Organization, Real Estate Analysis and Life Transition.

Nancy offers seminars in Feng Shui, People Reading Skills, ADD/ADHD, Re-Wiring the Brain, Applied Intuition, Real Estate Analysis, Peak Performance, and Dispute Resolution as well as custom topics. She teaches courses at the Academy of Oriental Medicine, the University of Texas Informal Classes, Texas State University, Austin Board of Realtors, San Marcos Board of Realtors and other venues. She has made guest appearances on KLRU television in Austin, TX, was the featured guest on an episode of “At Home” produced by Shenandoah University Public Television in Winchester, VA, and has traveled as a featured expert speaker for Princess Cruise Lines. Nancy writes for numerous local publications, and her syndicated Austin Homesteader articles and others appear on her website. She also serves clients in D.C. where she has presented at The United States Department of Labor and the U.S. Department of Justice.

Tyler: Welcome, Nancy, and thank you for joining me today. In your introduction, I didn’t mention anything about the elderly, so let’s begin by my asking what made you decide to write “Moving Your Aging Parents”?

Nancy: Hi Tyler.

The idea came to me while driving back from a weekend of helping Mom prepare for a move away from her friends and nearer to me for health reasons. I realized how many other families are or would be going through the same process and how many of my students and clients were looking for some guidance. I’ve done a lot of different things in my life—Mediation, Victim Services Counseling, a little real estate investing, Feng Shui—and each of them gave me a different toolset for helping with this process, yet I still felt emotionally and physically overwhelmed. In organizing my own thoughts around what this relocation would entail for Mom and in thinking of ways to make it easier and more rewarding for her, the book evolved in my mind—and eventually on paper!

The journey that Mom and I experienced transformed our relationship. I believe there are real gifts for everyone involved if we just know how to find our way. I hope this book provides a compass of sorts.

Tyler: What are the important things to keep in mind when moving a parent to a new place to live?

Nancy: I think the most important aspect in the beginning is actively to include them in as much of the planning and decision making as is possible. This will vary depending on health, personality and mental status, but the worst thing to do would be to make unilateral decisions based on *assumptions* about their desires and what’s “best” for them (which is often just what’s best for us). In the process of making health and safety decisions, it’s paramount to remember how much their emotional and spiritual well-being will influence both healing and their ability to embrace a new place.

Secondly, most relocations will involve moving away from something that is either treasured, or a least familiar. Helping parents identify or find things to look forward to can lessen the sadness and create a sense of positive anticipation and engagement.

Finally, we must realize that the real work starts after the physical move has been accomplished. Once in the new place, their ability to love their new life depends on making new friendships; finding a way to get to new doctors, shopping and entertainment; and feeling “at home” amid new surroundings. The book offers step-by-step activities and ideas to help this process along.

Tyler: How does the moving experience vary based on whether the parent is moving to an apartment, nursing home, their adult child’s home or an assisted living facility? What sorts of issues or concerns are different with each location?

Nancy: Wow! That’s another book! The easiest answer in purely practical terms is: how much “stuff” gets to make the trip with them. But the more important issue is what each of those choices implies about health, mobility, independence and possibly, finances. The single greatest defining factor here, in my opinion, is the degree of disparity between the home they are leaving and the one they are going to and how we can lessen the gap.

For example, moving from a 2000 square foot home into a tiny apartment because one has made a proactive decision to be nearer the grandkids or better climate is light-years apart from moving to a small space in a nursing home or assisted living due to health reasons—even if the logistics of the move are the same. The issue becomes not so much the size, as the reason(s) for the move and the options available for re-creating the sense of comfort and well-being at the destination. The more restrictive the destination, the more limited the options might be and the more creative we have to be in responding to the needs and desires in the Nine Life Domains used in the book. The question is always: “How can we make the process more gentle and supportive and offer them something on the other end that will honor the spirit and help them thrive, not merely survive?”

Tyler: Nancy, will you tell us more about the Nine Life Domains you discuss in your book?

Nancy: Sure! They are modified a little bit from the classic Feng Shui terminology, but apply for everyone, in any stage of life. The Nine Domains are a way of breaking life into manageable pieces that help us do everything from setting goals and thinking about what would be optimum to making decisions about what goes with us on the move and how we set up house on the other end. What shifts as with different life stages are our priorities in each one. They are discussed at length in the book, but briefly they are:

- Health: encompasses all issues that impact our ability to feel our best in whatever the circumstances might be.
- Career and Activities: has to do with how we want to spend our time.
- Knowledge and Spirituality: involves matters of the spirit, feeling connected to life, wisdom.
- Family: includes our biological family and people who feel like family and support us emotionally.
- Financial Affairs: includes all matters pertaining to fiscal responsibility, available funds and the ability to feel in control of the life we want for ourselves.
- Extensions Into Community: involves issues of character and how one wants to be seen in community, as well as how we WANT people to think about us.
- Relationship: includes spouse, significant other or any person with whom we are sharing an emotionally close relationship where deeply personal information is shared.

- Children, Future and Creativity: can relate literally to children, but also our ability to see what we want the future to look and feel like, and the creative spark we bring to both everyday life and hobbies or expressions of self.
- Helpful People and Travel: involves people who help us, care-givers, etc. It's related to travel because the more we expand our boundaries, the more we expand the pool of available helpers.

Tyler: If a person is not going to be the primary caretaker of a parent, but rather it will be a nursing or assisted living home, how does the adult child make sure his or her parent will receive adequate and excellent care or just be happy in the new location?

Nancy: That's an excellent question and one I would answer in two steps. The first step is to choose the facility carefully and hopefully find one that is near a family member who will be able to monitor actual, on-going care via frequent visits. Some of the questions I would ask if screening a facility are summarized below, but additional information might be found on the Internet.

- Contact each facility on your list of candidates and arrange for a tour. Pay attention to courtesy and how you are handled during the conversation, the number of interruptions, etc. If it's a local move, ask Mom or Dad if they have a preference or have friends in one that is being considered. The emotional benefit of having a friend in a new place can override some other considerations.
- Make a list of both specific and general questions having to do with care: staff to patient ratio, private or semi-private rooms, space for personal belongings and visitors, entertainment, access to an outside garden, proximity to medical care and/or physical therapy, names of visiting physicians, etc. Administrative changes in the past six months can also be relevant—find out why and if the change has been well-received by the nursing staff. Nasty internal politics can derail patient care.
- Bring a note pad with you. Note the demeanor of both staff and patients, pay attention to sensory cues: smells, lighting, color, sounds, moods, number of lights flashing on the patient call board and how long before they are answered, condition of rooms and bathrooms as you pass through the halls, cleanliness of walls, corners and equipment everywhere, cafeteria activity and even artwork.
- Notice the condition of the residents, particularly those who seem most impaired: facial expression, cleanliness (hair, clothing, etc.). If possible chat casually with them out of ear-shot of staff.
- Have a meal on site and note the quality and taste of the food, the manner in which it is presented and how attentive the wait-staff are to the needs of the residents.
- Talk with related service providers in the area: hospices, home-health agencies, etc. Be sensitive to evasiveness about particular facilities and to what is *not* being said.

After the move has occurred, the issue of care actually rendered becomes a monitoring issue. The first week is typically consumed with assessments, the determination of needs and preferences, and establishing basic routines. After the initial frenzy, things calm down—the resident is no longer new—and the real longer level of care becomes more routine and apparent. Frequent visits, hearing-between-the-lines, observation of mood changes as well as appetite and general demeanor are vital. The first few months after the transition are the most critical.

Tyler: Nancy, in the book you talk about how to cope with the Depression-era mindset. Would you explain what you mean by that? What is it about the Great Depression that lingers on in the lives of our elderly people?

Nancy: Survival during the depression required saving and reusing everything because one never knew if or when an item would be available, and if it could be afforded. I'm talking about essentials here, not luxuries. Because there was such strong emotion attached to this period of life, long-term emotional and neural patterns were established becoming "hard wired" in the brain and continue to define life, even after the actual crisis was over. Those living through the depression learned to save every piece of string, rubber band, car part, rag, household item, piece of clothing, etc. If they didn't need it personally, someone else would or it could be traded for something

else. Because the emotional environment and brain chemistry remained in place, many decisions continue to be made as though the depression never ended.

Since every action was rooted in survival, cleaning out and divesting of items when necessity dictates, can feel threatening and be seen as wasteful, unappreciative and sinful. Helpers can exacerbate the problem by not acknowledging the perceived or real value of both the past experience and the parent's belongings.

Tyler: What is the role of estate planning in moving a parent to a new place to live?

Nancy: I'm not sure I'm qualified to answer that, except to say that it's imperative that a *valid* Last Will and Testament and a Durable Power of Attorney be in place and updated to reflect changes in status of those listed as Executor and moves out-of-state. (Moving from one state to another can have ramifications. Louisiana, for example, still functions under a "civil code" derived from Napoleonic Law, which is absolute about the manner in which an estate can be divided.) Conferring with a Probate attorney and a CPA before another crisis hits, can ultimately eliminate a great deal of worry and fear for both parents and adult children.

Tyler: Nancy, your book contains a lot of practical advice about moving. To what extent should the elderly parent be in control of the move and to what extent the adult child. For example, in terms of packing items or deciding what should be sold or discarded from the current home?

Nancy: The complaint I hear most often from elderly clients is that they have felt excluded, managed or manipulated. Although adult children don't usually mean to do this, it can be a by-product of making difficult decisions based on assumptions and competing needs, especially if the process is rushed. Much grief can be avoided by giving the elderly parent the *opportunity* to participate to the degree that they are interested and capable. When assistance is offered or provided, great care should be taken to see that it is not overwhelming. When too many people are involved, anyone can become overwhelmed. It's especially true for the elderly, infirm or those dealing with some disability. Timing and pacing are very important and whoever is overseeing the move should know the elder parents' capabilities and limitations or be skilled enough in working with elders to be able to determine parameters.

If the process is started early enough, the elder parent might be able to be involved in most decisions. If that's not possible, determine some guidelines. Unless the parent is non compis, or has given blanket permission, it wise *not* to discard items without consent or approval. There are many ways to include a parent without taxing physical or emotional strength and those appear in the book.

Tyler: Once arrived at the new residence, what are the most important things to do first?

Nancy: Assuming that utilities have already been turned on, locate the items that are most critical to comfort and safety, depending on the specific needs at the time of the move. That might mean finding medications and snacks first and then setting up a comfortable space for Mom or Dad, where they can be included if they want to be. Next, get the bedroom in order so there is a place to sleep or rest.

Tyler: When it comes to making the parent person comfortable in the new location, what is important—for example, how important is it to arrange the furniture in a pattern similar to the former home, to get the artwork up on the walls, etc. To make the new home appear familiar, and how can one accomplish this especially if the new home is laid out differently or much smaller?

Nancy: You're right, it's a new place and things probably cannot be arranged in the same way, but much of the furniture is probably the same and a different constellation with some basic pieces will simply feel like they've redecorated. It is important to find out their favorite reading chair or TV chair and make sure it's positioned so they can use it in the same way. Everything else can be arranged around that requirement. What's most important is to recognize "memorized patterns" for reading glasses, medication, kitchen implements and other things they depend on. As much as possible these should be placed in a similar pattern.

With artwork, it helps to ask what they really want to be able to see all of the time and what they simply want around because it's sentimental and needs to be *somewhere*. Artwork that has made the trip is probably important, but once in the new place they may be able to part with additional pieces. The book has ideas about how to hang collections so they feel cohesive and don't look cluttered.

Tyler: What are some of the emotional and devastating consequences that can result if an elderly parent's move is not done properly?

Nancy: A re-location can be exhausting at any stage of life. For an aging parent, loss of the familiar is like a death. Depression and malaise can ensue, starting a downward spiral that includes: confusion, loss of appetite, disinterest in life, compromised immune system, social withdrawal, refusal to take medications or bathe, anger, diminished sense of self-worth, and distrust of those who helped with or encouraged the move.

Tyler: What if everything that could be done to make the move run smoothly is done but the parent is still resentful or decides they are not happy in the new location? Do you have any advice for dealing with this kind of frustration?

Nancy: Oh that's really a good question, because no matter what is done there is likely to be an adjustment period, which—to some degree, must simply run its course. This is a huge transition and the loss parents might feel over being far away from old friends and not knowing their way around is a lot like the grief cycle. Many frustrations will be blamed on the new location and the kids, because those are concrete, physical entities and good targets for emotions that need a target!

First, we must come from a place of compassion and realize that just because they are venting their anger or frustration doesn't mean we always can or are expected to "fix it." Sometimes simply listening and acknowledging the feelings will really help. "Mom, I can see you're feeling sad over the move. Is there anything you can think of that would make it better?" In my Mom circumstance, those questions would sometimes yield a response I could work with—like finding driving routes for bird-watching, or locating easy transportation to the library. Other times, I simply commiserated with her and acknowledged what she was feeling. It helps really to listen with the heart to hear where the frustrations originate and then speak from the heart, not from the logical mind, or the critic that takes everything personally and feels it must defend. That's a hard one, because after doing so much work and putting such an effort into making it right, it's easy to feel defensive when feeling blamed.

I would offer some words of comfort here. My mother complained bitterly, off-and-on. One time she said she felt she'd been jettisoned onto Mars. She said she "had nothing in common with anyone, no one spoke to her and couldn't even get groceries." None of that was true, by the way, because in the next moment she might report having had a wonderful conversation with someone who had so many of the same philosophies, etc. and I knew there was a weekly bus to the grocery store and the pharmacy WITH help carrying the groceries into her apartment! The point is, many complaints originate in a moment of stressor sadness and might have little to do with the reality. Nevertheless, the perceived injustices feel real—and can not always be "fixed."

After about six months, things began to change: her anger dissipated because she had established a routine and the new became familiar. Then, one day a year and a half after she'd arrived there, Mom was diagnosed with Pancreatic Cancer and the world changed. The same people she had held at arms length (her personality, not theirs), were the ones who so gently and thoughtfully brought her food, puzzles, and cards saying how much she meant to them. They spent time just talking about things that she would not have granted time for previously. They went to the store, read to her, played her favorite games and allowed her to taste life in a way that would never have happened in the town she left behind.

So I would say, give it some time and listen and do things together whenever possible, but don't take on so much for your parents that they are not motivated to make the connections that result from going with the group on the bus, play games on Game Day and meeting people for breakfast. In some ways, the lessons we have learned with our children are useful: allow them to blossom and to discover things on their own. And don't catch them every time they fall, because they won't discover or perhaps re-discover their strengths and realize that sometimes, someone else—a new friend—is there to help them up.

Tyler: That's really great advice, Nancy. It seems like common sense, but just asking your parents what might make things better for them is an important thing to remember. I also want to ask you about how you have practiced with Feng Shui. Do you apply Feng Shui principles in terms of making the new residence feel like a home? Can you give a few tips on how to do so?

Nancy: Yes, because they go so far to create comfort and emotional balance. The arrangement of a living room can support or derail communication. The book offers diagrams and ideas that can be adapted to any room. In the bedroom, the position of the bed in relationship to the door can make the difference between a great night's sleep and feeling anxious and restless. The optimal bed placement allows the largest view of the entire room AND a view

of the door, without being in-line with the door. If you can walk straight through the door and hit the bed, it's not a good sleep position. Really there are so many possibilities that are referenced in the book. Since Feng Shui includes ergonomics, psychology and matters of the spirit and the special needs of those living in the space, all bases are covered to quickly and easily create the feeling of being "at home" and cared-for.

Tyler: Nancy, are there resources beyond reading "Moving Your Aging Parents" to help adult children cope with this transition phase of moving their parents?

Nancy: Area Agencies on Aging can be helpful in finding local resources for transportation, in-home care giving, meals, off site day-care and other daily needs that might need filling once the move is complete. The National Association of Senior Move Managers (NASM), the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO), and The Feng Shui Directory can help in locating professionals by city and state preferences. Local Real Estate Boards can point the way to realtors specializing in real estate issues unique to this phase of life.

Tyler: Thank you so much for joining me today, Nancy. Before we go will you tell us about your website and what additional information may be found there about "Moving Your Aging Parents: Fulfilling Their Needs and Yours"?

Nancy: My website www.focusonspace.com offers a broad range of information on Feng Shui, Special Needs and my approach in working with clients. The book website www.movingyouragingparents.com is "under construction," but it will offer a synopsis, reviews and ordering information. It's a work in progress and more tips and information will be added in the future.

Tyler: Thank you, Nancy, for the informative interview. I bet many people will find your book extremely helpful and make moving their parents much easier. I'm sure many people wish they had had this book sooner. Best of luck to you.

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