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How Older Adult Couples Make Downsizing Decisions

Nikki Buckelew, PhD

Virtually every government, organization, community, family, and individual will ultimately be affected by what was first described in the 1990s as the impending Age Wave.\(^1\) While the growth rate of the over-65 demographic is expected to stabilize between 21-24% from 2030 onward, the oldest-old and fastest growing segment of the population (age 85 years and older) is expected to grow from 6 million in 2014 to 20 million by 2060.\(^2\)

Despite research indicating that most seniors desire to age in place,\(^3,4\) there comes a time when older adults must evaluate their current and anticipated future circumstances. This evaluation is referred to as residential reasoning.\(^5,6\) In fact, it is said that the decision about whether to live independently at home or move to a retirement community setting is one of the most significant decisions of a lifetime.\(^7,8,9\) This makes the role of the real estate professional invaluable.

The Study

As a veteran real estate agent specializing in the mature market for over two decades, I have observed that the residential reasoning process of older adults, especially those ultimately choosing to relocate to senior living communities, is of particular interest. Therefore, this research serves to help answer the question of how older married couples perceive and describe the experience of residential reasoning.

A qualitative research method was utilized to gain rich, detailed descriptions of the residential reasoning experience of six married couples ranging in age from 73 to 85 (average 81), all Caucasian, heterosexual, and residing in independent living apartments located in or around the Oklahoma City metro area. On average, the couples had lived in their previous residences for 25 years with a range of 4 to 56 years. Each couple participated by being interviewed and then individually (without the spouse present). Interviews were transcribed and evaluated for common themes.
Findings

A total of six themes and ten subthemes emerged from the data; however, for purposes of this article, only themes most pertinent to the role of the real estate agent are expanded upon here: (a) The experience of someday; (b) The experience of declining capabilities; (c) The experience of selecting a forever home, and (d) The experience of letting go of personal possessions.

The experience of someday. Regardless of age or circumstance, all of the couples reported that ideas about a future relocation had pervaded their thoughts in the years before they moved. The early reasoning of male participants tended to be one of wait and see while females contemplated what if scenarios and researched their options far in advance.

Harry: I was a homebody and in pretty good health…. But then we talked it over and I realized that we’re over 80 years old. If something happened to one of us, we would really be in a bind because she doesn’t drive.

Margaret: I just think we both knew we probably [would move to the nearby senior apartment complex]. This is the only place I’ve ever been in because I’ve had so many friends over the years that have been here. But every time I’ve been in one of these apartments, I go home and mentally place my furniture in it.

The experience of declining capabilities. All the couples interviewed were experiencing either non-normative or normative age-related decline. These physical and/or cognitive changes were significant factors in their decision making. In fact, had it not been for current or perceived future difficulties affecting their home maintenance and homemaking responsibilities, the couples indicated they would most likely have continued to attempt to age in place.

Abigail: It was a big responsibility. But I just – it was becoming a big thing. Joe had always run the sweeper and mop, well, he was getting to where that was a load for him.

Harry: The yard and maintenance of the yard is really one of the factors that led into us wanting to move.

The experience of selecting a forever home. Once the decision had been made to move, the goal became finding a suitable residence that would accommodate both their short and long-term needs. As they began to consider declining capabilities, increasing concerns about future care needs, and a desire to alleviate the need for family support, they looked to options beyond typical homes or neighborhoods.

Joe: I’m only going to be here for maybe two years to five years, nobody knows. She’s up in age too so she needs somewhere that’s safe, somewhere that’s comfortable… a place that has some pretty good activity and around people.
Carol: This is so much—you get so much here for the rest of your life and all levels of care. It’s a lot of stress really off my shoulders.

Tom: We moved into a smaller house before...that was our third forever house...this is our fourth forever house.

The experience of letting go of personal possessions. Surprisingly, those in the study all noted that the decision to relocate was easier than subsequent decisions about which personal items to keep and which to liquidate. This process created marital tension for some couples.

June: It is very frustrating downsizing. I kept saying, “Oh no, I can’t throw that away.” We have a storage unit which is packed now with stuff that we kept.

Dan: She keeps putting it forward... going through every cupboard. “What do we want to keep? What can we bring?” I tell her, “We can’t bring anything else over here. We can’t. We’re full up.” But we keep carrying back and forth and back and forth.

Applications for Real Estate Professionals

Statistics from the National Association of REALTORS® Profile of Home Sellers indicate that one in four home sellers is age 65 or older. So, whether an agent is specializing in the mature market or simply employing typical lead generation strategies, they are likely to encounter older adult home sellers in their regular daily practice.

This study highlights the fact that older adult couples, while intending to age in place until death, may ultimately elect to sell the home and move into a congregate setting. The impetus for this type of move is often a level of physical or cognitive decline making homemaking and/or home maintenance tasks unmanageable or undesirable. The same difficulties causing home ownership to be a burden can also limit their ability to conceive of, orchestrate, and execute a move. In order to better assist these clients in forwarding the relocation process, agents must cultivate and/or develop appropriate and qualified resources or referral partners, paying special attention to the spoken or unspoken capabilities and concerns of the elder client.

Recommended Reading

References


About the Author

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Dr. Nikki Buckelew (PhD – Northcentral University) holds a bachelor’s degree in Family Studies and Gerontology and master’s degree in psychology from Southern Nazarene University. After 20 years as a real estate sales associate, broker, and business coach focused on the mature market, she earned her doctorate in psychology with research focused on older adult living environments. She is the founder of the Seniors Real Estate Institute, which provides coaching and training for real estate professionals seeking specialization in the mature market. Together with her husband, Chris, they own and operate an Oklahoma City based real estate practice and senior move management company dedicated to the simplification of late-life relocations. Her research interests include residential normalcy, residential reasoning, and environmental gerontology. Her passion is educating, equipping, and empowering people to make informed and educated decisions.