

Navigating the Critical Decisions of Solo Agers

By Wendl Kornfeld

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The decision to change your place of residence and current lifestyle is daunting at any time. For many older people, it's a time that's loaded with strong emotions and fears of the unknown.

There are numerous guides and resources for adult children for when to consider moving parents to a senior residence or facility, when to bring in home care, relocate nearer to the parent, or have them move in with you. Indeed, adult children are often the ones who start these decisions because they have noticed something about their parent that is changing, or of growing concern.

But what if you are without family, living alone? Will you be able to take an objective appraisal of early signs and changes, recognizing that it is the right time to make a plan for the future? Have you already noticed some of those signs? Perhaps you're losing things more often, or not keeping up with housekeeping, or letting bills slide. What is your normal behavior, and what should you consider a wake-up call? Can we rely upon friends and neighbors to give us candid reality checks on how we are doing? Will they speak up if they notice we aren't going out much anymore, or our grooming slipped?

Making plans to leave a beloved home or area too early could deprive you of years of a comfortable and happy lifestyle, or might seriously deplete your savings. Waiting too late could be disastrous, because you might not have the stamina to deal with critical thinking and implementation. When is the 'sweet spot' for a solo-ager to make these critical decisions on their own?

People who are aging alone are a resourceful, resilient demographic who cherish their independence. Our numbers are growing rapidly. We may dread the future, or we may be curious. We may be practical, or we may be in denial. But most of all, we need to learn more about when and how to plan for our best life possible.

We urge professionals and organizations in medicine, social services, the arts and the tech industry to teach solo agers to identify indications that it's time to make future life plans in earnest. Then, please give us lots of options, allowing for different incomes, locations and lifestyle preferences! Don't sugarcoat anything, but help us appreciate the sweet spot as the beginning of a new adventure. Give us a good road map and some viable destinations. And let's stay in touch often.

Wendl Kornfeld is a longtime member of Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York. Wendl's career spanned 46 years in advertising, publishing and nonprofit work. When she retired, Wendl determined that "learning to be old" would be her new job, with a focus on older people without family to help them navigate the unique challenges of aging. She has been running groups in community-building and self-advocacy in NYC since 2014.