



## ***He Got Better in the Nursing Home!***

Imagine this situation:

You and your family did everything humanly possible to keep your Father who has Alzheimer's disease living at home with your Mother. Eventually his increasing aggression and agitation, care needs, and the concerns about his safety became overwhelming for the entire family. So you and your family decided it was necessary to place him in a nursing home; which was an agonizing decision for all of you. You worked together to choose the best nursing home in your area to care for someone who has Alzheimer's disease.

When your Father moved in to the nursing home three months ago, he was confused nearly all the time. He rarely recognized you or other family members and didn't eat without much encouragement. He was falling on a regular basis and, overall, his condition appeared to be worsening by the day.

Fast forward three months:

You have been visiting your Father several times weekly and can't believe the changes you are seeing in his condition. He seems significantly better than he did three months ago when he entered the nursing home. He still gets very confused and often calls you by your Aunt's name, but he is clearly more alert and oriented than he was. He hasn't fallen and he is eating without being pushed. You and your family members are flabbergasted!

How could someone with Alzheimer's disease appear to be getting better?

**This is a true story told to me last week by a caregiver. She was dumbfounded by the positive changes in her Father. As happy as she was that he was better able to communicate now, his changed condition also raised questions and concerns for her.**

One of her questions was whether or not he really had Alzheimer's disease. Could it be possible he was misdiagnosed?

I assured her that although it was possible, it was highly unlikely. Several months earlier he had undergone a very thorough assessment process at a geriatric assessment clinic. It was more likely that the positive changes were attributable to the interplay of a number of factors, including enhanced nutrition, a very predictable routine, an environment created to provide comfort, safety, and stimulation to persons with Alzheimer's disease, and a change in medications to help control his agitation and depression.



She also wondered if his improved condition in the nursing home was evidence that her family had not provided good enough care for him when he was at home.

Again, I assured her that was not the case. However, a frail elderly spouse is unlikely to be able to provide the same level of care for someone with Alzheimer's disease – even with her children's help – as a facility staffed with many people who are trained to work with persons who have dementia.

Finally, she was concerned that the nursing home might send him home now that he was doing better. She was afraid of what this would do to her Mother who was also ailing.

I told her that they would not send him home; he clearly needed the type of care the nursing home was providing. I also gently reminded her that Alzheimer's disease is a progression and irreversible disease and that she could expect to see declines in his functioning in the future.

This is not an uncommon story. Sometimes moving an aging relative to an environment that is specifically designed to care for someone with Alzheimer's disease or another chronic illness results in a temporary improvement in the condition. Instead of viewing this as an indication that the family "failed" to provide good enough care at home, it is evidence of what an excellent decision it was to place the aging relative in a facility designed to provide the care he/she needed.

Dr. Amy