

How to ease the pain of downsizing – advice for families



Downsizing is an exercise that many people undertake, for numerous reasons – to release capital, to find a more practical home, to be closer to family or friends, or to live in a property that's more suited to a lock up and leave lifestyle – to name just a few. For those who have been alone in the family home during the pandemic, the realisation that they would prefer to have their family close, rather than cherish a happy memory of them in a childhood home, has been stark.

Covid-19 has highlighted the need for a move for many retired homeowners who have found the pandemic a challenge, practically and emotionally, without the support of family and friends.

John Lavin of Cognatum says, *“More often than not, the first barrier to downsizing is an emotional one rather than a practical consideration – knowing the ‘family home’ is being left behind can be a real wrench for children as well as parents. Helping to overcome the emotional and practical challenges related to living in a smaller home falls to the downsizer’s immediate family, generally their offspring. In our experience, it can take time for everyone to come to terms with the concept of downsizing, so my advice would be to start the conversation early, well before the moment arrives that a move becomes urgent. While it’s an abstract idea rather than a pressing reality, it can be discussed non-confrontationally and in a positive and constructive way, allowing the ramifications to be considered one by one rather than all at once.*

“Often the first obstacle to overcome is the reluctance to leave what has been a family home behind, along with all the memories. While objectively the benefits may be obvious, it’s important to understand how emotive this move is. It’s about so much more than the property, not least the fact that that era of their lives is over. While the family home still exists it’s easier to go on believing that children can come home if they want or need to. Leaving it involves accepting that everyone has moved on and the change can feel like irrelevance. And for children, recognise that you may also feel some reluctance to accept this reversal in responsibilities – enjoy your happy memories for what they are and focus on the future.

“Try to focus your conversations on the benefits but do acknowledge the objections. Brushing over real considerations in search of a superficial agreement won’t help. Spend some time researching the kind of

property that you think your parents would love and share with them the most gorgeous examples. While you still may be at the ideas stage, and not in a position to buy anything, it’s worth going to see properties, so they can start to get excited about a move.

“Once you have started to overcome the emotional hurdles surrounding a downsizing move, you will inevitably have to deal with the practical objections - the obvious downside (or upside depending how you look at it) of downsizing is that there will be less space! We tend to spend our lives accumulating stuff, and it can seem like an impossible task to fit the contents of a four or five bedroom family home into something with as little as half the square footage.

“Everyone’s concept of what is precious and what isn’t is different, so this stage of the process requires plenty of diplomacy. Trying to bat away worries about where all the books will go, or how the ancient dresser will fit into a new home isn’t the best strategy. Once you’re discussing what to keep you’ve overcome the most difficult hurdles, so go gently. Be aware though that at this point you will likely be confronted with the need to make your own sacrifices – parents’ lofts tend to be very accommodating for parts of childhood that we haven’t wanted to part with!

“Establish what the real deal breakers are and embrace them. If books are the sticking point (and they often are), suggesting you chuck them all out and buy a Kindle isn’t helpful – a book collection isn’t generally about reading! This is also true of vinyl collections or a model railway, it’s about recognising that these things are very much a part of the people involved. Pondering how they might be accommodated can be good fun, and an excuse to indulge in some interior design magazines for inspiration. Factor the need for this space into the property search and be prepared to think creatively. The same goes for specific pieces of furniture. If a table or a dresser is non-negotiable, work around it, it might make the search more difficult but not impossible. Above all do not get drawn into conflict, it is often the case that an issue becomes less important as time goes on – it’s difficult to dig your heels in if there’s no opposition.

“Converting a garage or outbuilding, creating a separate room in the garden, or converting a loft into occasional space by boarding it out can be ideal solutions, and custom shelving can be fitted almost anywhere.

“Your parents may be enthusiastic about having a good clear out, but if they are not then be helpful. Be enthusiastic about taking items that your parents no longer really need but are reluctant to let go. The accumulated ‘stuff’ of a lifetime, in the form of shape of china and glassware, furniture and pictures can be hard to let go of. If it helps to know that things going to the family rather than the charity shop, you will be doing everybody a big favour by saying you’d like them. If you need to put it in your loft for the foreseeable future, so be it.

“Start the organisation process well in advance of any move. You’ll probably find cupboards full of paperwork, boxes full of photographs, and cabinets full of DVDs, CDs and probably video tapes. Spend some time enjoying what you find, humour will defuse a situation. You could also try watching/listening to these ‘treasures’, you will probably find that once rediscovered a lot of it is no longer wanted. If your parents don’t use a streaming service, introduce them to one. Offer to get the photographs scanned and archived, and turn them into lovely photo books. Transfer the movie footage to digital to ensure it is restored and preserved. Help go through the paperwork, dispense with the unnecessary, and file the necessary sensibly.

“In the event, once you have been through these processes and the property hunt is on in earnest, you may well find that your parents fall for a property that doesn’t accommodate the stuff that they felt was indispensable, and their mindset will change. But you will have facilitated this change in mindset and enabled them to enjoy the next step.”

Cognatum, an independent not for profit company, has 60 retirement estates across central and southern England. All are in prime locations within vibrant market towns or villages, within walking distance of shops and restaurants. Each estate benefits from thoughtful architecture, landscaped grounds, and a dedicated estate manager.

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