



Maine Dementia Partners, LLC



The Memory Care Tour Guide

What I Look for When I Walk Into a Facility

How to Sleuth Your Way Through a Tour

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Touring a memory care facility is a time for questions, not just looking.

Listen, but pay attention. When someone says, “here's our lovely dining room,” the real question underneath it is how residents actually get fed. You're not just collecting answers, you're getting a feel for how this place operates, and how your loved one would feel living here.

Hold people to their answers. Notice how staff talk to you, and how they talk to residents when they don't think you're really watching. You want more than black and white answers, you want to know how the place feels.

This isn't a comprehensive list, it's the things you will want to understand. How things operate when it's not smooth, or if your loved one needs something. You don't need to answer everything here, think of it as a framework: could you partner with this place, its staff, its rules, its rhythm. Listen to what they talk up, and what they don't talk about or have very little to say about. Not every poor answer or incomplete one is a red flag, but when we start asking harder questions, we start seeing a different reality. The reality you will actually be dealing with if you decide to move your loved one in.

Chipped paint matters less than residents who look cared for. Perfect paint matters a lot less if residents look unkempt, or checked out.

Go twice, once at a hard hour like mid-afternoon or right before dinner, or on a weekend.



Who works here

People can get defensive about turnover, so ask it gently: "Are the people caring for residents consistent? I know that matters in dementia care, and I'd like to know how long staff typically stay."

Ratios matter, but they're not the whole story. Ask your guide to point out staff as you walk, some places make it obvious with name tags or matching shirts, some don't. Watch how they interact with residents, warm or rushed. This is part of why you visit more than once.



Answering the phone

Call the facility and picture you're worried about your loved one. How long does it take before you reach an actual person? Can you leave a voicemail? Does anyone check the voicemail?

I've been in memory cares more than once that don't answer their phone. That's not acceptable, not when this is where you'll need to reach someone fast.



A day, in practice

Ask what an ordinary day looks like, start to finish, not the version on the brochure.

- How do residents wake up, and how are staff assigned to them?
- What time is breakfast, and how are medications given?
- How do you support residents who struggle with bathing or showering?
- What's on the activity calendar this month, and what are the most popular activities?
- Are residents taken on outings?
- Can preferences be accommodated, different meals or snacks between meals?

Ask to see the actual calendar taped up in the hallway, not the printed one they hand you at the front desk. Residents who are involved and going outside regularly display less sundowning, and therefore the facility will have prioritized keeping residents engaged.



Meals

Ask to sit and watch one full meal, if possible. This is a great time to take in a lot of information that you will find useful later. A full meal isn't necessary if you don't have that time, just be aware that this might be something you want to know about.

- Where are meals served, and do residents eat together or in their rooms?
- Do staff sit with residents during meals, or come and go?
- How are dietary restrictions accommodated, and are residents able to get food when it isn't meal time?
- Who's trained to respond if someone chokes, and is rescue equipment, like a LifeVac, kept in the dining room itself?

I've watched someone die of choking in a memory care unit. A year before it happened, I told that facility's leadership they needed rescue equipment in the dining room. It costs about a hundred dollars. It wasn't made a priority.



Behaviors

Residents do best when their days have real stimulation. That doesn't mean academic activities or rigorous exercise, it means real time outdoors.

- If there's a courtyard, how often is it used?
- Is it open, or do residents have to find a staff member and ask to go out? This is a big difference.

If courtyard access depends on finding a staff member and asking, that's a no for me. It's often explained away as a safety measure. I don't accept that answer, and neither should you. Having access to the outdoors creates a better environment for all residents. If this isn't a priority, I would not recommend this facility.



Wandering and doors

Most memory care units legally can't lock residents in their rooms. Ask how they manage that if other residents wander at night, or if someone is having their things stolen. This happens in every memory care, so what we're looking for when I ask this is: what will the steps be to help solve a problem like this if it should happen with my loved one?



Room changes

- What triggers moving a resident to a new room or a different unit? Sometimes this is done as a knee jerk reaction. We want to know that you will be consulted if this needs to happen. Moving rooms and units causes stress, anxiety, and confusion for someone with a fragile brain. We want to know that the facility is thinking about this.
- How much notice do families get, and are you consulted or just informed?

A facility that moves people without much conversation is telling you how much your voice will carry later, when it matters more.



The emergency room

- How many residents went to the ER last month? A ballpark number is okay.
- Can they treat something like a urinary tract infection on-site, or does that mean a transfer?
- Does someone go with your loved one if they have to go out?

Frequent transfers aren't vigilance, they usually mean a facility that can't assess. The ER is dangerous for someone with dementia. People often come back worse if no one is with them to advocate.



Staying in the loop

Caregiving doesn't end when memory care starts. For a lot of families, this is where it really begins.

- Who calls you when something changes, and how soon?
- Can you speak with two or three families who have someone living there right now?

Watch their face at that second question. A facility proud of its care connects you without hesitation.



End of life

- Can residents stay through the end of life, and what would prevent that? Things such as needing a higher level of care are good to know.
- Do they have residents on hospice now, and which agencies do they work with?
- How do they manage pain in someone who can no longer report it?

If your guide is uncomfortable talking about death, this facility hasn't made peace with the disease it treats. That will show up later, and cause more stress for you and your loved one.



What you'll notice without asking

- Do other residents look clean, groomed, dressed for the day?
- Are people out of their rooms, or parked in front of a television?
- Does someone call out, and does anyone go to them?
- Do staff greet residents by name and crouch to eye level?

Before you talk yourself into the courtyard or the dining room, ask one question: could I picture the person I love being cared for here on their worst day. Not their best one. This is a guide to start thinking about what it will be like if you have to work with this facility. In moving someone into memory care, you're entering a partnership, and a better understanding of the dynamics you will be working with is important.

Often people make choices because they are concerned about the scarcity of beds. Please be aware that often these wait lists are not as long as we might think. Do not make rash decisions if it can be avoided.

Touring memory care can get overwhelming fast. If you're looking at facilities now and want another set of eyes on what you're seeing, call or email me and tell me what part of the process you're in.

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