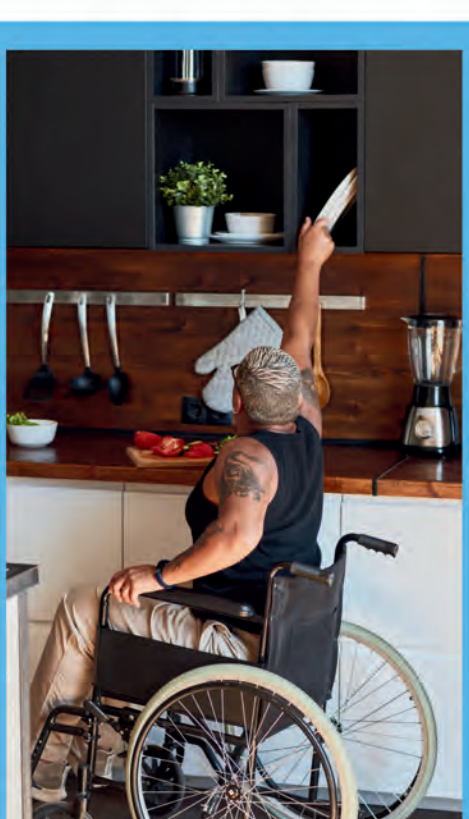
by Ghina Itani

Is Your Home BOOMER-PROOF?

A Ten-Step Guide to a Long Term Supportive Environment

As our population ages, healthcare systems face growing pressure to meet the complex needs of older adults — especially as the number of patients over 65 rises rapidly and a wave of boomer-age providers approaches retirement.

Designing supportive environments for older individuals requires a shift from institutional models to residential-style spaces that emphasize familiarity, simplicity, and safety. Changes caused by dementia, such as impaired memory, disorientation, and distorted sensory interpretation, require specific design interventions that go beyond standard aging-in-place strategies. The primary goal is to maintain cognitive function, facilitate activities of daily living (ADLs), and reduce behavioral symptoms like agitation or anxiety through thoughtful environmental cues. This includes creating intuitive layouts that aid comprehension, providing visual access to nature for orientation, and regulating sensory stimuli to prevent overstimulation.



Ultimately, a dementia-supportive home uses the "hallmarks of home" to promote independence and provide a sense of ownership and security for the individual.

This guide integrates general design principles with room-specific strategies to create a safe, familiar, and supportive home environment.

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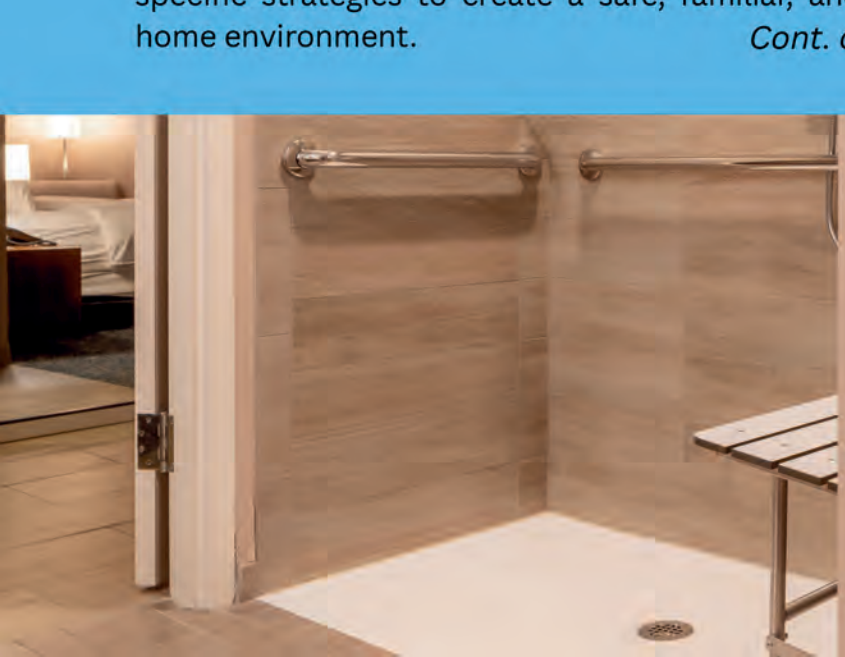

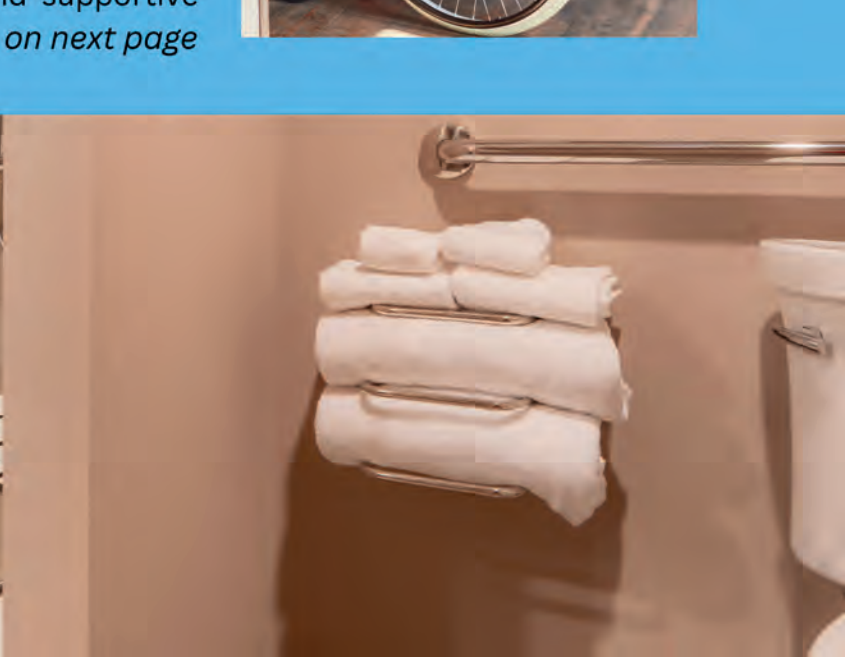

A Ten-Step Guide to a Long Term Supportive Environment (Cont.)

1- Familiarize the Layout and Finishes: Use familiar residential finishes and intuitive room configurations to improve navigation and comprehension. Remove institutional icons like complex medical equipment to maintain a sense of home and minimize confusion.

2- Optimize Flooring and Mobility: Ensure all floors are smooth, level, and slip-resistant, avoiding high-contrast patterns or glares that can be misinterpreted as holes. In living areas, provide "touchstones" for balance, such as wainscot trim, and maintain hallways at least 42 inches wide for mobility aids.

3- Facilitate Nature Access: Establish direct visual and physical access to outdoor gardens with low-maintenance, non-poisonous plants. These views help orient the individual to the time of day and season while reducing feelings of captivity.

4- Personalize the Bedroom Retreat: Designate the bedroom as a private de-escalation space on the main floor, personalized with familiar items to reinforce ownership and support long-term memory. Ensure the room has a 60-inch turning radius to accommodate wheelchairs or medical equipment.

5- Enhance Kitchen Visibility and Safety: Use open shelving or glass-front cabinets so everyday items remain visually accessible, supporting procedural memory. Install side-opening ovens and anti-scald devices to prevent injuries during meal preparation.

6- Prioritize Bathroom Accessibility: Design curbless, 36-inch-wide showers and include fold-down grab bars on both sides of the toilet. Ensure there is sufficient space for two caregivers to assist if a patient lift is required.

7- Implement Smart Night Lighting: Install motion-activated or sensor lighting for pathways between the bedroom and bathroom. Use amber-colored LED lighting at night to provide visibility without disrupting the individual's circadian rhythms.

8- Improve Laundry and Task Ergonomics: Use front-loading washers and dryers raised 12 to 15 inches off the floor to reduce physical strain while standing or sitting. Provide accessible storage for cleaning and first-aid supplies to support caregiver efficiency.

9- Integrate Assistive Technology and Caregiver Support: Utilize voice-activated technology for independence in controlling lights or music. Designate a quiet, well-lit work area for medications preparation away from distractions.

10- Regulate Sensory Input: Foster a calm environment by minimizing overstimulation from loud noises or excessive clutter. Use adjustable window treatments and diffuse lighting to control glare and prevent disorienting shadows.

"I design healthcare environments that improve human experiences, support performance, and create spaces that promote healing, wellness, and human connection."

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