

How Do You Know When It's Time to Seek Help?

Aging is a compound transition that brings many changes, including:

- The loss of family members and friends
- A change in living arrangements or finances
- Retirement
- The loss of driving privileges;
- Even the death of a pet are lifestyle

This transition requires the entire attention of the family. Ideally, our elders will ask for our help during times like these, but, as you may have already learned, this doesn't always happen. In fact, one aging parent might "cover" for the other, or one aging spouse may decline assistance from the other because he or she feels ashamed and powerless.

Know What to Look For

It's normal to occasionally forget details or put things off, but when a pattern of neglect develops, it may be serious. Remember, dementia (mental deterioration) is not a normal part of aging. Sharpen your observation skills, and look for patterns of consistent neglect within the following contexts:

Basic tasks: difficulty in walking, dressing, talking, eating, cooking, climbing steps, or managing medications.

Hygiene: infrequent bathing, unusually sloppy appearance, foul body and/or mouth odor.

Responsibilities: unopened mail, papers piling up, illegible checkbooks, unpaid bills, accumulation of bank account overdraft notices, unfilled prescriptions, unreturned phone calls, burned cooking pots and pans, uncleanly refrigerator, low food supply, unkempt home (interior/exterior), laundry piling up, new dents on the automobile.

Health: weight loss, changes in appetite, problems swallowing, fatigue, burns, black and blue marks (possible signs of falling), hearing loss (look for signs of lip reading and talking loudly), seems withdrawn without reason, incontinence (bed-wetting), spilling and dropping things (check carpet for stains), complaints of muscle weakness, insomnia or excessive sleeping, dehydration.

Isolation: lack of interest in outside friendships, activities, or hobbies; keeps curtains drawn day and night; has little access to transportation; lives in another city or state and lives alone.

Attitude: sadness, display of verbal or physical abuse, talk of being depressed and feelings of despair, abuse of alcohol or drugs, paranoia, refusal to communicate, unusual argumentativeness, a recent emotional or medical crisis.

Cognitive functions: consistent forgetfulness about where things are; getting lost while walking or driving; confusion; loss of reasoning skills; difficulty answering questions; inability to find the right word; use of repetitive words or phrases; severe personality changes; wandering; inability to recall names of familiar people or objects; inability to complete a sentence, forgetting how to use simple, ordinary things such as a pencil; forgetting to close windows turn off the stove, and lock doors; loss of sense of time.

Open Up a Dialogue

If some of these warning signs are present, and you are beginning to question the elder's ability to make choices and decisions, it's important to not jump to conclusions. Overreacting can cause you and your family undue anxiety and create communication friction. Take time to talk with a professional versed in aging issues and begin a dialogue with your family and loved ones.

But, *let the caregiver beware.* You are about to enter a potential minefield. Without knowing the most effective ways to initiate these very sensitive conversations with your elderly family members, the probability of them telling you to mind your own business, or telling you everything is fine when it is not, is almost guaranteed.

Many older people are incapable of running their own lives and homes, but often are reluctant to admit they need help. We've talked about the signs that indicate some kind of assistance may be necessary. The following checklist will help you to discuss these signs in the context of needing care:

Inadequate Meals and Nutrition

- Does there appear to be a loss of interest in preparing well-balanced, nutritious meals?
- Are there unusual amounts of spoiled food in their refrigerator?
- Have food dates expired on staple foods such as dairy and meat?
- Are there many packages and cans of the same thing?

Are there many dented cans and other containers?

Unopened or Piled Up Bills

Is mail piled up unopened?

Are there many more than usual magazine subscriptions coming to the house?

Do some of the bills come from unrecognizable sources?

Recurring Memory Lapses

Are they missing doctor appointments or forgetting to make them?

Are they making mistakes with their medication? Too much? Forgetting to take their pills? Confusing medications in original containers with those laid out on a daily basis? Getting repeat prescriptions from more than one doctor or pharmacy?

Are foods left cooking on the stove?

Have pots been burned?

Frequent Falls

Are medicines causing dizziness or loss of balance?

Are they refusing to use a prescribed cane or walker?

Are there loose rugs or uneven flooring areas in their home?

Lack of Interest or Feeling "Sort of Down"

Have there been many peer losses recently?

Has the sadness gone on for a long time?

When was the last time they had a complete physical? Have you talked to the doctor?

What kind of social activities do they engage in outside the home?

Unsafe Driving

- Have you noticed a change in their driving capabilities?
- Do they get angry when you bring up a discussion about driving?
- Have you noticed changes in their agility, reflexes and eyesight?
- Have there been recent accidents?

A Marked Change in Behavior Patterns

- Is the home as neat and spotless as it used to be?
- Have they stopped attending church services or keeping beauty or barbershop appointments?
- Are they more irritable or otherwise moody, teary, sad?

Conversation Clues

- Do they repeatedly bring up the same issues of concern for discussion that might be indicative of areas they need help with but are reluctant to ask for outright?
- Have neighbors or other relatives spoken to you of their observations?