

Watching for the Signs...

How do you know when your family member needs more help? Watch for clues that show certain daily activities have become too difficult because of physical or mental changes. Are bills going unpaid? Is the person neglecting grooming or skipping meals? Does the home appear unkempt? Use the checklist and suggestions below to help you decide if your family member is safe at home.

Isolation/Depression

- Not leaving the house much
- Not eating well
- Sleeping too much, or having difficulty sleeping
- Not enjoying usual activities

Trouble with Daily Activities

- Wearing the same clothes (may be having trouble with dressing or doing laundry)
- Decline in personal hygiene (trouble with bathing)
- Decline in weight (difficulty preparing or eating meals)
- Unkempt house (having trouble bending over to pick things up, unable to manage housekeeping duties)

Decline in Mental Status

- Unopened or unpaid bills (unable to manage checkbook)
- Finding items in "unusual" places (dirty dishes in the cupboard, clean clothes in the hamper, etc)
- Dressing inappropriately (wearing summer clothes in the winter, pajamas during the day, shoes untied)
- Medication errors (mixing up medication, taking them incorrectly) or missed Dr. Appointments
- Getting lost frequently (asking for directions to a familiar location, taking a long time to arrive at their destination)
- Increased "forgetfulness" (look for unpaid bills, spoiled food in the fridge or burned pans in the sink - they may be forgetting to turn the stove off!)

Increasing Medical Needs

- Needing daily or weekly treatments such as dialysis, or physical rehabilitation
- Daily medication regime is becoming complex or difficult to manage
- Uncomfortable with medical equipment (such as oxygen concentrator or tanks)
- Needing close monitoring of health status (blood pressure, illness, etc)
- Increased Falls
- Difficulty walking or getting around
- Difficulty getting into or out of chairs, couch, bed, car
- Watch for "unexplained" bruises and/or cuts

Caregiver "Burnout"

Caregiver or family member exhausted and unable to keep up with needs of your family member. Sometimes there are situations that can be improved and your family member is able to stay in their home safely. Things such as grab bars and shower chairs in the bathroom may be all they need to help them with their bathing. Hiring a cleaning lady to help with vacuuming and laundry or rearranging furniture to clear pathways and decrease the risk of falls. The most important thing to remember is their SAFETY. If you feel they are no

longer safe living alone, other living arrangements need and should be looked into. As abilities and strength diminish, families and other caregivers must often help the older person obtain the assistance needed to maintain independence. Investigate and suggest resources such as bill paying services, "meals on wheels," lawn care, house cleaning, and window washing companies. Some seniors will prefer professional help to dependence upon family members.

Talking About Living Arrangements

Introducing changes to the person's living environment or considering a move to more accessible housing is best approached long before safety issues become paramount. Too often, the individual is facing losses in other areas of life and resistance to change is increased.

Introduce the idea of change through small, less intrusive modifications in the guise of gifts or services when you notice a need. For example, while replacing hard-to-reach light bulbs upgrade the wattage for improved visibility. If adaptations or repairs are needed such as adding railings on stairways or replacing worn or uneven floor covering, etc., offer to help the individual make choices and deal with contractors.

Modifying the Home Environment

The truth is that many aging people face limitations on independence in their homes only because the design and arrangement of resources no longer meet their needs. Enlist the help of an occupational therapist to aid you in identifying ways to improve safety in the home, to arrange resources, and to modify the environment to help compensate for disabilities individuals may be experiencing.

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants are specialists in helping people to deal with the effects of illness and injury on their ability to manage daily life.

Introducing and Supporting Change

The therapist can also help you and the older individual explore implementing changes in ways that may make them more acceptable. For example, consider offering financial assistance. Many older people are highly concerned about conserving resources for future needs for themselves or their spouses. Others have little experience with current costs and may fear being overcharge for materials and services.

Try building suggestions for change around "I" messages. "I worry about you falling on those dark basement stairs. As a birthday gift, we are going to make sure your stairs are safe and well-lighted."

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