

Signs That Your Loved One Could Benefit From Additional Care

By Judith S. Parnes

Many older adults do not ask for help – particularly because they often fear that they will burden their families or lose their independence. When an individual experiences a stroke, heart attack, hip fracture, or other sudden changes in their health status, families are faced with the need for crisis management.

However, a loved one's needs generally change slowly, without us noticing. Especially when we live out of town, our parents might assure us that everything is fine—when in reality, they are having trouble living independently.

More than half of family members presently caring for an older relative started doing so because a loved one had an injury, illness or medical condition that left them less able to function independently. However, there are other issues, such as depression, poor nutrition, death of a spouse, isolation or loneliness that can further compromise an individual's physical and mental health in just a short period of time.

Here are some indications that an older loved one's care needs are changing:

Losing interest in preparing/eating meals – Sometimes people, who suddenly find themselves alone, tend not to eat properly. Do you see expired or rotten food in the refrigerator or signs of excessive weight loss (clothes much looser)? Does stroke, arthritis, or another health condition make it hard to prepare food or eat? Studies have found that poor diet can increase the risk of dementia in seniors and weaken the immune system.

Declining personal hygiene – Changes in appearance are the most obvious sign that some assistance is needed. These signs can range from unkempt hair and body odor, to unshaven faces and wearing clothing that is unclean, unchanged for days or inappropriate for the weather. It may be difficult to get in and out of the bathtub, use the washing machine, or remember to perform the daily tasks once taken for granted.

Deterioration in driving skills – Look for evidence of parking or speeding tickets, fender-benders, dents and scratches on the senior's car as signs that driving skills may be deteriorating. Decreased ability to see, poor sense of direction, inability to merge into traffic, driving way under the speed limit and slow reaction time is a recipe for disaster with older drivers.

Reluctance to leave the house – Rather than ask for help, loved ones who are having trouble, e.g. walking, remembering directions, seeing, or hearing, will slowly pull away from their community/friends and isolate themselves. We now know that inactivity and isolation leads to depression and further decline

Household bills piling up – Some individuals can feel overwhelmed by the simple task of opening and responding to daily mail, as well as balancing a checkbook, particularly if eyesight is failing or if this was once the responsibility of a now-deceased spouse. This can result in overdue bills, bounced checks, utilities being turned off due to lack of payment and other creditor issues

Losing track of medications – Missed doses and medication mistakes (overdosing and running out of pills before the next prescription can be refilled) can lead to very serious medical complications. Older people often take multiple prescriptions for various health conditions, which can be overwhelming without assistance and reminders

Caring for your loved one is a growing challenge. Are you experiencing "caregiver burnout"? Are you losing sleep worrying about your loved one's increasing needs? Is keeping in touch by phone, email, and occasional visits may no longer provide adequate assurance about your loved one's well-being.

The key to knowing if your loved one needs help is to be mindful of changes in their typical behavior as outlined, and most importantly for you the caregiver to know when you need to ask for help.

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