

MAINTAINING INDEPENDENCE AT HOME

By Judith S. Parnes

Mom says she's doing fine living at home by herself, but how do I really know that's true? Dad is becoming forgetful but is trying so hard to be independent he won't admit he may need help living on his own. What can we do?

Adult children of aging parents are grappling with those kinds of questions every day. For many, ensuring that their parents can maintain their independence at home has become a growing concern, particularly since the present 65 year old has become the average middle age with aged parents now living into their 80's and 90's.

A recent study of New Yorkers offers insight on the importance of this issue in this metropolitan area, if not the country. According to the survey, 49 percent of respondents report they are "very worried" about making sure their aging/elderly relative can remain independent and stay at home for as long as possible. This level of reported concern is on par with how they feel about other major issues, including the 57 percent of those polled who are "very worried" about the cost of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the 52 percent who are "very worried" about the direction of the nation's economy in the next five years.

This survey is quite revealing since it puts into perspective how such a personal concern as caring for our aging relatives is just as important to many of us as global issues, including politics and the economy.

There is no one set of guidelines for dealing with the transitions that occur when a loved one confronts age-related changes. However, there are ways to alleviate worries about whether they are living life to their fullest at home with the best level of support to meet their needs.

Understanding that each older adult and family is unique, geriatric care managers can guide them in identifying support and assistance aimed at helping an older person remain independent in a home environment.

The first step is to define what level of in-home care or outside assistance is needed. It can take many forms that allow an older adult to remain self-sufficient and maintain a meaningful quality of life.

For some, it may simply mean receiving help from family members, friends or neighbors who stop by more often to perform routine household chores, run errands or provide transportation for shopping or doctor appointments. For others, it may mean receiving regular visits from medical professionals who monitor their health needs. Another option would be bringing in a home health care professional on a full- or part-time basis.

Furthermore, it may be beneficial to explore the wide variety of products to enhance their home environment, including emergency devices, senior mobility aids and bathroom equipment designed for safety.

While managing the care of a parent or elder relative is a sensitive topic for many families, it is vital to acknowledge that all of us cherish our independence, particularly in our American culture. A geriatric care manager can assist the older adult and their families find the necessary balance to assure quality of life and quality of care concerns are respected. Only then can relationships of mutual respect, trust and understanding be nurtured — and anxieties be eased— among everyone involved.

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