

When an Aging Parent Needs Help

Our Guide Through a Challenging Time

Helping an aging parent accept that they need help is one of the most difficult tasks an adult child faces, and understanding when a parent is truly at risk of injury is complex.

If your parent has been diagnosed with dementia, the answer is clear: seek assistance now. But if the path isn't so clear, how do you know when your concerns are justified? Don't dismiss gut feelings. If you are routinely noticing several of these issues, work with your parent to schedule an assessment for age-related safety issues with their physician.

Increased House Clutter.

Housekeeping is a major indicator of a person's well-being, particularly when it is not the norm. If you walk in and notice dirty clothes on the floor, cluttered countertops and dishes piling up, that's a sign your parents may have mobility issues or have a lack of energy. Check the refrigerator for old food or a low supply of food.

Financial Troubles.

Falling behind on financial matters is another sign that help may be needed. Is mail starting to pile up, specifically bills? Any type of financial troubles – an uptick in donations or donations to organizations you don't know, late notices, strange credit card payments – need immediate attention.

Trouble Walking.


Observe your loved one walking. Are they picking up their feet and walking in a straight path or do they have a shuffling gait and an unsteadiness? Are they holding onto rails or touching the walls as they walk? These are all indicators of balance and mobility declines that can lead to falls. You may notice that your parent is spending most of their time in one room of the house. As mobility decreases, people may choose a recliner or area and begin to gather most of the items they use during the day in that one area.

It is not uncommon for children or friends to have an incomplete picture of the challenges their loved one is facing, especially if they don't routinely observe the person for extended periods of time.

Sometimes, a conversation about in-home support progresses to an understanding that more help is needed when a home care agency conducts an in-home assessment or a physician conducts a safety assessment.

Although assisted living is not a subject we're eager to think about, embracing supportive services can be the best way to maintain a quality life as we age. A quality assisted living or memory care community may actually provide a lifeline back to a higher level of independence and well-being.

The Keys to Quality Assisted Living



1

Cleanliness and Infection Prevention

In these days of COVID-19, rigorous infection-control measures are paramount. Does the campus have strong screening measures for associates and visitors? Can the staff easily explain their infection-control and prevention measures? Selecting a community that is part of a larger system helps ensure access to resources such as personal protective equipment and dedicated clinical leadership.

General cleanliness is an important quality indicator. The main lobby, common areas, dining rooms and hallways should be odor-free, clean and not cluttered with unattended carts, wheelchairs and other objects.

2

Staff Interactions and Resident Engagement

Person-centered services mean treating residents as adults and caring about their well-being. Are staff members calling residents by their name? Are they greeting residents they pass in the hallways and offering assistance to someone who looks like they may need help? Do they knock before entering someone's room?

Look for residents who are out and engaged, having conversations with each other or staff or attending resident programs. Program calendars should address all the dimensions of wellness – social, physical, intellectual, and spiritual – and you should see flyers promoting upcoming events, including virtual. Ask how family members are included in operations, from scheduled family meetings to newsletters and updates.

3

Credentials Matter

Are all of the community's caregivers credentialed, either at the geriatric nursing assistant or certified nursing assistant level and above? Certified dementia practitioner is an added level of training in memory care. Staff should include registered nurses and delegating nurses, which have credentials above the RN level and provide full care management.

4

'Hidden' Fees

At some communities, all utilities, housekeeping, laundry, meals and basic care needs such as medication management are included. Some communities charge a la carte. For instance, housekeeping, medication management and utilities may be excluded. These add up. Ask the admissions counselor and read the fine print.

5

Understanding Level of Need

If a parent is not able to feed themselves or facing significant cognitive declines, they may need a more structured setting than assisted living communities can provide. A good rule of thumb is that someone should be able to be safe for several hours on their own – to know that if there's a fire, they need to call for assistance, or that they have trouble standing and need to call someone for help before they get up.

Difficult Conversations

Talking to Your Parents About Aging



Figuring out how to sensitively approach someone who is encountering age-related declines is, hands down, one of the greatest challenges – and most important conversations – a person will face.

As with any important conversation, preparation is key. Before you begin, make sure you:

- ✓ **Understand the primary safety categories:** medical safety; activities of daily living; home safety; driving safety; and, financial safety.
- ✓ **Have your facts and observations in order.** If you don't live close by, take a few days or a week to gather as much information as possible.
- ✓ **Gain an accurate idea of monthly income** and investments and determine if they have advance directives.
- ✓ **Educate yourself on the resources that exist nearby,** so you have concrete options to offer when the conversation begins.
- ✓ **Be clear about what you can offer should your parent continue to decline or even sustain an injury.** Your parents may assume you will take them into your home. If you cannot, and you know they have the financial resources for an alternative, don't feel guilty, and tell them now that it's not an option.

Approach the topic with empathy *and listen*

Listening to your parents will allow you to discover their real feelings. Discuss the fact that the loss of independence is not a sign of weakness or personal failing, but a force outside their control. *Be empathetic.*

Give your parents as much control and as many options as possible. Make sure they know that you are doing this because you care and explain the benefits of assistance. Try, "Mom, you've done so much for me. Now it's my turn to help. What I see is really worrying me. What can I do to help you stay independent knowing that I can't be here with you because of my job/schedule/children?"

Rather than saying: "Mom, I need your keys," try: "Let's make this convenient for you. How about I make arrangements for transportation for you to your appointments; it's time for you to enjoy some pampering."

Instead of: "We're going to arrange some home care services for you. Isn't that wonderful?" try: "We know this must be difficult for you, and we wouldn't suggest help if we didn't think it was the best way for you to remain independent in your home as long as possible."

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State Facts and Observations

Start the conversation with observations. Maybe you've noticed the house is more cluttered or unkempt. If you are noticing declines in personal care, it can be helpful to bring them in front of a mirror and ask them if they notice anything different about their clothing or hair.

If safety is a concern, try asking: "It looks like it is more difficult for you to get up and down the steps. Have you noticed that?" If Dad agrees, you can talk about moving the bedroom downstairs and making modifications. Sometimes this conversation helps to clarify that making the necessary modifications isn't feasible, and a move will be necessary for true security.

Suggest your loved one give assistance "a try." This alleviates the pressure of making a final decision. Usually, people keep the assistance once they have made a connection with the helper. Remind them that having services in place can help prevent injuries and problems that will essentially force them to leave their house.

Make money part of the conversation. Compare the cost of a few hours of care to round-the-clock care or assisted living. If you know they have enough money to get the help they need, let them know you would rather they do that than save it for you.

Enlisting a physician or neutral party

It can be helpful to bring in an outside person who has a close relationship with your family but who doesn't have the emotional pitfalls that often come with parent-child relationships, including a physician.

If you are noticing memory care or depression issues, get a physician involved immediately. Even if that is not the case, taking your parent for a check-up can lead to some undeniable evidence. Most individuals trust their doctor. Just be sure to inform the physician prior to the appointment of the issues at hand.

Remember that resisting help is a normal reaction – especially if faced with a long-term loss of independence. Most parents don't want to "be a burden" to their children. Be honest about your concerns and don't shy away from discussing the worst-case scenarios, such as a fall and hospitalization, that can occur. As these conversations progress, continue to remind them that this is a proactive way to ensure they retain their independence and a good quality of life.



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