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How do I Know That My Loved One Needs Help?

Know What to Look For

Things may seem normal on the outside. Some changes are barely noticeable. Occasionally we all 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

Mail unopened, papers piled up, checkbook unreadable, bills unpaid, bank account overdraft notices accumulating, prescriptions unfilled, phone calls aren't returned, cooking pots and pans look burned, refrigerator interior has foul odor, food supply is low, home interior and/or exterior is unkempt, laundry is piling up, car has new dents.

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and blue marks (possible signs of falling), hearing loss (look for signs of lip reading and talking loudly), seems withdrawn, incontinence (bed-wetting and "accidents"), spilling and dropping things (check carpet for stains), complaints of muscle weakness, insomnia or excessive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, has little access to transportation, lives in another city or state, 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, getting lost while walking or driving, confusion, loss of reasoning skills, difficulty answering questions, inability to find the right word, 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, locking doors, loss of sense of time.

If some of these warning signs are present don't panic. Instead, sit down with your loved one and share your concerns. Develop a plan before it becomes an emergency. Older adults still living in their own homes are often afraid to verbalize this question while their adult children are more proactive and out in the community looking for options. Adult children see their mom or dad living alone or losing touch with their peers, so try to present options to loved ones in a positive way so as not to bring pressure.

Should My Parents Move?

If 5 or more of the following statements are true, then it is time for your parents to move.

- My parents don't ask for help when needed.
- My parents don't travel because they are worried about their home.
- The neighborhood has changed and my parents no longer feel safe.
- My parents no longer drive and there's no bus near their home.
- My parents fall frequently.
- My parents don't leave the house and complain about it often.
- People call the house regarding past due monies and my parents write a check without verifying the bill.
- My parents give money to people they don't know.
- My parents call frequently asking for help with chores they no longer can perform.
- My Mom's spare bedroom stores extra food and items she's purchased for no reason.
- My Mom is now a hoarder.
- The house is falling apart and my parents don't notice.
- My parents say they're eating well but all I see are candy wrappers but no food.
- My Mom is extremely thin and frail.
- Daily showers have turned into weekly or monthly showers.
- My parents don't remember to take their medications.
- My parents have almost burned the house down because they left the burners on.
- Mom gets lost going out on errands or returning home.
- Mom is not dressing like she used to. She's wearing mismatched clothes and shoes.
- Mom is urinating all over the furniture and not noticing.
- Mom and Dad can't hear the phone ringing.
- Taking care of Mom and Dad has become overwhelming.
- My Mom always took care of the checkbook but now doesn't know how.