

Is your aging parent managing? Watch for signs that a frail loved one is having trouble coping alone

Your elderly mother left the stove on and burned up an oven mitt. Your well-dressed father showed up at a family get-together in a stained shirt. You've noticed they aren't able to keep up with the housework, and the fridge is full of expired food. You worry about their safety and health. Are they still able to live on their own?

It's difficult to determine whether your aging parent, or loved one, is managing alone. No matter how hard it may be for them to look after their day-to-day chores, many frail seniors are reluctant to ask for help. They may think of it as an admission of incompetence, an invasion of their privacy, or even be afraid they will be forced into institutional care if they admit they can't keep up. Whether out of anxiety or pride, many older adults try to conceal the mental and physical difficulties they are experiencing with age.

On top of this, you may find it hard to admit your parents need help. They have always been the ones to take care of you, and it can be strange to find the roles reversed. Your parent or loved one may also be determined to stay in their own home, and naturally, you want them to be happy and independent as long as they can. But staying healthy is also a priority, and that means living in a clean, safe environment, following prescriptions properly, eating nutritious meals, and even keeping the finances under control.

Determining the problem

The following checklist will help you assess whether your loved one needs help:

Grooming

- changes in appearance, dirty or unkempt hair, ragged fingernails, decaying teeth
- mismatched or soiled clothing
- body odour

Housekeeping

- dirty dishes or laundry piled up
- accumulation of garbage
- excessive dirt or clutter
- unsanitary conditions, especially in the kitchen or bathroom

Nutrition

- noticeable weight loss
- complaints of poor appetite, or loose-fitting dentures
- insufficiently or inappropriately stocked refrigerator and pantry
- expired or rotting food in the refrigerator

Finances

- accumulation of unopened mail, especially bills
- major credit card debt, or large, inexplicable bank account withdrawals
- bounced cheques
- inability to perform basic banking transactions, including writing a cheque.

Is your aging parent managing? (continued)

Medication

- non-compliance with medication regimes – look for prescriptions that haven't been filled, and unused or expired containers of medicine
- lack of an organized system for managing medications
- prescriptions filled by a variety of pharmacies

Mobility

- difficulty going from a sitting to standing position
- poor balance
- poor walking endurance
- difficulty negotiating stairs within the home
- inability to safely access the community via walking, driving or public transit

Safety

- recent falls – be on the lookout for bruises or limping
- cluttered walkways or stairwells
- accidents with household appliances

Energy level

- lethargy
- social withdrawal

Mental Status

- poor short-term memory
- confusion
- inability to carry out familiar routines or follow instructions
- poor judgment stemming from lack of insight into needs and limitations.
- suspiciousness

Making a care plan

If you think your aging parent or relative is unable to cope alone, you will need to make a plan to take care of their needs. Ask your doctor or another

expert in seniors' health to help you assess the situation and find the best solution for everyone involved.

Begin discussing care options with your parent, or loved one, as soon as possible. Talk about where you think they need help and include them in the decision-making process. While they may not want to talk about changes, be respectful and don't give up. This is a very frightening time for many seniors—just imagine how scary it would be to admit you can no longer cook your own meals, or even climb the staircase in your house. They need your understanding and support.

If you find it difficult to talk to your loved one, try enlisting the help of someone they trust—such as a doctor, pastor, friend or neighbour—to discuss the problem and reinforce the need for help.

Remember there are many different care options available, from housekeeping services and meals-on-wheels programs to seniors' residences that offer laundry, social activities and 24-hour medical care. Your plan should be based on your loved one's needs and abilities as well as your own!

Be sure to consider your own limits—physical, mental and financial—when creating your plan. Being a caregiver can be exhausting, so you should be prepared to ask for help. Family, friends and community organizations can all lend a hand.

To learn more about the resources available in your community, contact your EAP counselor, health professional or local seniors agency.

Website Resources

1. National Advisory Council on Aging,
http://www.naca-ccnta.ca/naca_main_e.htm
2. Public Health Agency of Canada – Aging & Seniors,
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/>
3. Seniors Canada On-Line
<http://www.seniors.gc.ca/index.jsp>

Family Services offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For more information on your EAP, call:

1-800-668-9920