

Caring for Parents

My Parents – How Do I Know If They Need Help?

As people age, their needs and abilities change. They may have trouble getting around the house or difficulty driving. They may not remember things as easily as they once did. And adult children of aging parents may notice that Mom or Dad is having difficulty – with their finances, perhaps, or with personal hygiene.

We all want to support our older loved ones' desire to live independently, even when we have concerns about their safety and well-being. But how do we know when it's time to step in? Start with an assessment.

An assessment is a full review of a person's mental, physical, environmental and financial condition to determine his or her ability to remain safely independent. It identifies risks and helps determine options to reduce them. It's very important to involve your parents in the discussion and decision-making about their options.

How Do I Help Them Know if They Need Help?

While it is possible for families to complete assessments on their own using standard check lists, there also are experienced professionals who can help. While check lists and professionals will vary somewhat, here are some basic areas you and your older family members may want to focus on:

- **Physical Health.** Have they been diagnosed with any chronic diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis or emphysema? Or other diseases, such as bowel or bladder problems, heart disease, stroke or cancer? Do they have vision or hearing problems, excessive weight loss or gain, or difficulty walking? Make a list of health professionals they currently see. Add any recent hospitalizations.
- **Mental Health.** Have they been diagnosed with any psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety or psychosis? Have they been diagnosed with Alzheimer's or another form of dementia? Are they showing signs of confusion, disorientation or isolation? What about mood swings or forgetfulness? Sadness or loneliness?
- **Medication Use.** What medications are they currently taking? What is the dosage? How often? Include over the counter medications. Are they taking their medication as directed?
- **Daily Living Skills.** Are they able to dress, bathe, get up from a chair, use a toilet, climb stairs, and use the phone? Do they know how to get help in an emergency? Can they shop, prepare meals, do housework and yard work? Can they safely drive?

- **Home and Community Safety.** How safe is their neighborhood? Does their home have smoke alarms, and can they hear them adequately? Can they avoid telephone and door-to-door fraud? Can they maintain their house?
- **Support Systems.** Do your older loved ones have frequent visitors or see friends? Do they go to a Senior Center, or get out of the house for other social reasons? Do family members live close by? Do they keep handy the names, addresses and phone numbers of key friends and family members who they can call in an emergency?
- **Appearance and Hygiene.** How is their overall appearance? Hair clean? Teeth brushed? Shaved? Do they dress appropriately in clean clothes?
- **Finances.** Can they live on their current income? Can they meet future needs with their current income? Are there any legal documents such as trusts, living wills, and/or durable power of attorney? Do they pay bills on time and make informed financial decisions?
- **Interests/Lifestyles.** Do they engage in their favorite hobbies, read books, watch their favorite TV shows, exercise, play a musical instrument, go to church, keep up with their friends? Are they still engaged in the activities they have always enjoyed?

There are good assessment tools and professional consultants who can help you and your older loved ones decide when assistance is needed. Some hospitals and clinics offer geriatric assessment centers. Some city or county agencies on aging provide the service. There are also independent geriatric care managers (also called case managers).

An assessment can lead to solving problems and allowing a parent to remain independent longer. It can result in fewer accidents and illnesses, a longer life, and a higher quality of life. It's not always easy to recognize when an older loved one needs help. Learning how to assess their needs will make it easier to know when, and how, to help.