

Caring For Elderly Parents

As parents get older, it can be difficult to acknowledge new limitations on their physical and mental abilities. It can even be a challenge to recognize when older parents need more assistance and when it is time to step in. Here are some warning signs that may indicate declining abilities:

- Unsteady walking or standing
- Withdrawal from social activities
- Decline in housekeeping and personal hygiene
- Changes in eating and cooking habits
- Memory loss
- Frequent fatigue
- Unopened mail or unpaid bills
- Confusion or loss of concentration

Although it can be uncomfortable to have a discussion about their need for assistance, in the long-run making a plan while the parent is still able to have input and express their own preferences will help insure the best quality of life. It is even better if these discussions can take place before there are any signs of deteriorating abilities. Here are some suggestions to help integrate the needs of an older parent into the lives of familial care takers:

- Begin by having a family meeting. Often elder care falls to one child, even when there are other siblings. A family meeting can help set expectations that everyone will contribute. Even children living out-of-state can help provide for some of the financial needs, including respite care for the relief of the primary care givers.
- Make a contact list of all physicians, appointments and prescriptions.
- Find out the side effects of any medications being used. (Some of the signs mentioned above may simply be side effects which can be improved by changing medications.)
- Whenever possible, accompany the senior to doctor's appointments. Ask questions on their behalf and maintain a file of any paperwork received. Make sure the doctor knows any new symptoms or side effects.
- Maintain records of health insurance policies and any recent examinations.
- Talk with an attorney about having the necessary tools in place for the parent, including a will, a living will, and a power of attorney for both health care decisions and finances.
- Become an expert on the community resources available, such as senior citizen activities, home health, and sitter services. Begin examining the variety of assisted living options available, as well as how they can be funded.

- Allow the parent to maintain as much independence and self-determination as possible. Keep in mind that your role is to assist, not to control.

As a care giver, you must take care of yourself. In addition to stress, it is normal to feel a sense of loss over the changing abilities of your parent, and anger at the new limits on your own life. To preserve your quality of life, and that of your family, it is critical to involve other family members and take advantage of all available resources. With proper preparation and support, this may even turn out to be a very fulfilling and special time in your relationship with your aging parent.

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