

How to Determine When An Aging Parent or Loved One Needs Your Help

10 signs that it may be time to step in with assistance and care.

There are many ways someone becomes a caregiver. For some people with an aging parent or loved one, a severe illness or medical emergency can make it clear that it's time to step in. But for others, the transition to caregiver happens more gradually.

It can be hard to know when to start providing more assistance. People who are aging sometimes don't want to admit they need help for different reasons. These might include shame, fear, denial, or not wanting to become a burden. In situations where conditions like dementia are involved, they might not even be aware that they need help. This can be even more challenging for their children or younger loved ones.

If you find yourself wondering if it's time to start helping your aging parent or loved one — or if you simply know you'll be stepping into that role at some point in the future — the following signs can help. Watch for these signs as indicators that you may need to provide care.

(Note: This is not a comprehensive list. If you have any concerns about the health, well-being and vitality of your parent or loved one, it's important to seek medical help on their behalf.)

1. Withdrawal from activities.

Are they staying home more and giving up favorite activities like book clubs, poker nights, or weekly volunteering? Whether they're forgetting about the activities, no longer enjoying them, or feel like they can no longer participate, their choice to isolate is something to keep tabs on.



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2. Poor hygiene or an unkempt appearance.

This can be sign of a cognition problem (memory loss, for example) or a clue that it's become physically difficult to perform daily tasks.

3. Neglecting to take medication.

They might brush off a missed pill here or there, but not taking their medication could be a big red flag. It can signal a memory issue and it's also dangerous to a person's well-being.

4. Forgetfulness.

Everyone misplaces car keys or forgets to close the garage door once in a while. But if your aging parent or loved one is forgetting things regularly, it could point to overall cognitive decline.

5. A messy house.

Not being able to keep up with household chores can signal a change in an aging person's physical ability or mental health.

6. Unexplained bruising.

The American Seniors Housing Association (ASHA) says that this can be a sign that your parent or loved one has been falling.

7. Not wearing suitable clothing for the weather can be a sign of self-neglect.

Loose clothing can further indicate weight loss, possibly as a result of an undiagnosed medical condition or malnutrition.

8. A car with dents and dings and/or traffic violations.

When someone is having trouble driving, they're putting themselves and others at risk. A decreased ability to drive can stem from physical issues (arthritis, vision loss, or joint stiffness, for example) or mental issues such as memory loss.

9. A stack of unpaid bills.

A decline in financial "housekeeping" that used to be done with ease might signal a cognitive problem.

10. Avoiding unnecessary walking or hanging onto furniture to get around.

Has your father stopped going to your son's baseball games because it's "too far to walk" from the parking lot to the field? Is your mother asking you to run errands because it's hard for her to get in and out of the car? These can suggest a mobility issue.

How to Offer Help

Focus on respectfulness and encouragement when you discuss caregiving with your aging parent or loved one. Keep it simple and sincere. Use phrases that help them maintain their sense of control. Start with something like, “Mom, please know that I’m here for you and want to do whatever I can to help you have the kind of life you want. How can I help you out more?”

You can get more detailed in your suggestions when you see clear needs. For example, you can tell them that you’d like to start driving them to their medical appointments or help them pay the bills each month.

If in-person conversations are difficult, you may want to put your concerns in writing. ASHA suggests the following: “Mom, Dad, we love you. You’ve always been there for us. We want to do the right thing. We’re not sure what the right thing is. We know you don’t want to be a burden, but we do worry.”

Of course, when their health is clearly at stake, you need to be more direct. If they’re unwilling or unable to seek medical help, it’s time for you to step in and call the doctor on their behalf.

Through it all, try to remember that the transition to caregiver — and care recipient — can be tumultuous, and many emotions are at play. As much as you want to honor your aging parent or loved one by tending to their needs in this new season in life, it’s equally important that you honor yourself for being willing to take on the challenges and rewards that come with being a caregiver.

Sources:

American Seniors Housing Association: 10 signs your aging parent may need help

<https://www.wheretheyoulivematters.org/10-signs-your-aging-parent-may-need-help/>

American Seniors Housing Association: Expert Advice on Family Conversations

<https://www.wheretheyoulivematters.org/make-decisions-as-a-family-expert/>

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