

## **ASSESSING NEEDS**

### **Of an Older Adult or Disabled Adult**

If you have aging or disabled relatives, friends, or neighbors, you may find yourself wondering, “When should I start to worry?” “How do I know when they need support, or services?” Here are some things to look for that may give you a hint that help is needed. For many of these questions, all you have to do is keep your eyes open. Other issues, like money management, may require more careful and tactful questioning. In general, you are looking for signs of change from past behavior.

#### **Driving:**

Driving skill can be an early casualty due to vision loss, early-stage dementia, or other neurological problems that impair concentration.

- Look at the car. Are there any recent dents or scrapes?
- Let them drive somewhere that is familiar to them and ride along. Do you feel safe? Any close calls or unusual variations in speed? Any signs of confusion about where to go?

#### **Mail:**

A casual glance around the home can be very telling in terms of lost organizational skills or possible depression or anxiety that results in avoidance.

- Is there a stack (or many stacks) of unsorted mail?
- Are bills and other important correspondence mixed in with outdated junk mail?
- Are there an unusual number of sweepstakes entry forms or charitable or political solicitation letters? (This can be a hint that an older adult is being taken in by fraudulent or deceptive marketing, or has been responding to telephone solicitations.)

#### **Paying bills and managing money:**

These things can be harder to determine without asking prying questions or looking at bank statements, but you may see evidence or hear stories about services getting cut off, or hassles with the bank.

- Are the utility bills getting paid on time? What about rent or mortgage payments?
- Is the checkbook balanced?
- Any signs of overdrafts?
- Are there a lot of credit card bills? Are payments being made?

## **Housekeeping:**

Look for changes from past behavior – what was normal for this person in their prime?

- Is the home reasonably clean?
- Have there been major changes in the level of cleanliness?
- Are there strong odors in the home?
- Is laundry getting done regularly? Do their clothes and bedsheets seem clean?
- Is the home cluttered? Are there safety hazards due to walkways being blocked?

## **Meal preparation and nutrition:**

Appetite can change with age and activity level, and changes in the way things taste or smell are also quite common in older adults. Sometimes this can be an early sign of a more serious medical problem, or may result in a problem if it leads to not eating regularly. Physical limitations such as back pain can also reduce the ability to stand long enough to prepare food, and loneliness or depression can take away the desire to prepare nutritionally varied meals.

- Are they eating regular meals?
- Any sign of loss of appetite or changes in taste or smell (picking at food, only eating a few foods)?
- Are they able to prepare food for themselves?
- Is there a reasonable amount and variety of food in the refrigerator and cupboards?
- Any signs of rotten food, or unusual overstocking of certain items?
- Do they appear to have lost weight recently?

## **Personal care:**

Changes in dress or personal grooming can also reflect a variety of issues. Perhaps arthritis makes it difficult to put on some kinds of clothing. Wearing the same clothes over and over may also indicate depression or other problems.

- Does the person appear well-groomed and appropriately dressed?
- Are their clothes clean?
- Do they change clothes regularly, or do they always seem to be wearing the same thing?
- Does she or he seem to be bathing regularly?
- Can she or he get in and out of the tub or shower without assistance?
- Are there stains or odors that might indicate difficulty with getting to the bathroom?
- If there are prescription medications, does the person seem to be taking them regularly? Does she or he have a system for remembering when to take them?

## **Changes in social behavior:**

If there have been changes in this area, the question is, “why?” Is transportation a problem? Does the person hesitate to go to social gatherings because hearing loss makes conversation difficult? Or are they withdrawing from the world because of grief or depression?

- Does the person still see friends and participate in social activities? If not, why?
- If they went to church previously, do they still go?
- Do they seem lonely or isolated?

## **Mental status:**

These are just a few indicators that there may be a problem with depression or possibly a neurological disorder. Remember that there may be many explanations for these behaviors, some of which are quite treatable, so don't assume “it's just old age.” Not all old people are miserable, focused on death, or living in the past.

- Have they lost interest in things they used to enjoy?
- Do they seem unusually worried, hopeless, or sad?
- Do they repeat questions or stories over and over?
- Do you have to repeat or explain things multiple times to get them to understand?
- Are they able to recall recent events accurately?
- Do they have difficulty concentrating on a conversation, a book, or a television program?
- Do they seem unusually sleepy during the day? Do they have a regular sleep schedule?
- Do they seem uncharacteristically angry or suspicious?
- Do they complain about items being lost or stolen?

## **If you notice a problem:**

- **Talk about it.** Discuss your concerns with the older adult first. Do your best to do this in a tactful, nonjudgmental way. Don't over-react.
- **Seek more information.** Depending on what you hear, you may also want to talk to other family members, close friends, or the older adult's physician to get more context, information, and/or suggestions.
- **Don't panic!** Remember, there could be a variety of explanations for many of these problems, including: simple loss of mobility; physical limitations; chronic pain; vision or other sensory losses; confusion due to medication problems; depression; possibly dementia. Help may be needed, but the person may still be able to continue living independently once problems are identified and supports are put in place.