

ASSESSING THE NEEDS OF AN OLDER ADULT

Adults with aging relatives or neighbors often wonder, "When should I start to worry? What should I be looking for?" Here are some things to look for when visiting, 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 -- are they behaving differently from their past normal patterns? If you do notice a problem, talk it over with the older adult first, expressing your concern in a tactful, nonjudgmental way. Express your concern, but don't over-react. Depending on what you hear, you may also need to talk to other family members, close friends, or the older adult's physician.

Remember that 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, or possibly dementia. Help may be needed, but the person may still be able to continue living independently once problems are identified and supports are in place. Don't panic!

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. Any recent dents or scrapes?
- Let them drive when you go somewhere that is familiar to them. 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 can sometimes 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- Are bills and other important correspondence mixed in with outdated junk mail?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 for money.)

Paying bills and managing money:

This can be a little harder 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? 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:

Remember, you're looking for evidence of significant change from past behavior, so if Dad was always sloppy, the fact that he doesn't live up to your personal standards isn't necessarily a cause for concern. However, if Mom, the perfect housekeeper, now doesn't seem to care that the dishes are piling up in the sink, it's time to ask questions.

- 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 seem clean? Do they wear the same clothes all the time?
- 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, but changes in the way things taste or smell are also quite common in older adults. Sometimes this is 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, but 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 he or she seem to be bathing regularly?
- Can he or she get in and out of the tub or shower without assistance?
- If there are prescription medications, does the person seem to be taking them regularly? Does he or she have a system for remembering when to take them?

Changes in social behavior

Again, if there have been changes in this area, the question is, "why?" Is it a transportation problem? Do they 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 not?
- 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?

Remember: observe, express concern, get more information if needed, plan, and only then, act!