

Are Your Aging Parents in Danger?

7 Signs That They Need Help

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The Intentional Caregiver

Shelley Webb R.N.

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Susie, who hasn't seen her mother in several months, decides to surprise Mom with a visit on Mother's Day. When she arrives, she is aghast to find that her mother is living in a state of disarray and may even be in danger of harming herself.

Susie finds very little food in the house and what little there is either not nutritious or has past the dates of expiration. There's a pot with burnt soup on the stove. There are stacks of bills that haven't been paid and Mom doesn't know how much money is in her bank account, if any. Mom obviously hasn't had her hair brushed in several days and she doesn't smell particularly pleasant either. Clearly, Mom needs some help.

Does this sound like a situation that couldn't possibly happen? It's not. In fact, it has become an all too familiar scenario.

In today's busy world, with families juggling work schedules, children in school, and after-school sports activities, there is little time for extended family visits especially when many families do not live in the same state.

The average caregiver is a 48 year working Mom with one child still at home! Yes, men participate, but their role is much more administrative and less hands on. At a time when baby boomer women are looking forward to more freedom, less time spent juggling the demands of child care, career and personal gratification, along comes the unexpected – a parent in crisis.

Here are 7 warning signs that your parent needs help and ways that you can keep them independent in their own homes as long as possible.

1. A Change in Habits or Behavior:

My father, who is of Swedish decent, always loved a good cup of FRESH hot coffee. When I visited him at my sister's home one day, I noticed he was drinking cold coffee and asked why. "Oh, I like cold coffee now" he replied. I later found out that he didn't know how to use the coffee maker anymore and only drank the remains of what my sister made in the morning before she left for work.

Any change in habit or personality could be a warning sign. Has your parent become easily irritated or suddenly taken to being tearful? These could be signs of dementia. And contrary to what many believe, dementia is NOT a normal process of aging.

Weight loss is another change in habit that is a warning sign. Your loved one may be unable to prepare their meals, fearful of using the stove or oven, unable to pay for groceries or just forgetting to eat. My father blamed his weight loss on the stress of living with my sister who had 4 kids, but in reality, he didn't know how to prepare meals for himself anymore.

2. Memory Loss – Forgetfulness – Confusion:

As people age, there is a possibility that they may have a degree of memory loss to the point that they may tell you the same stories several times, but when the stories are repeated several times in one day, that is a problem.

Talk to your loved one about specific people in the family who are not their children. Do they remember them? Do they seem confused as to whom you are referring? Ask them about a situation that they would normally recall. If they look at you quizzically, that may be sign for concern.

Has your parent had any automobile accidents lately? Should they be driving? Do not wait until there has been an accident to talk with them about having a driving assessment.

Early dementia sufferers are especially prone to fears of socialization. Has your parent been skipping church lately or

avoiding other social situations with excuses of being tired or having a “other plans”?

Remember though, that people with dementia become pretty adept at covering up for their deficiencies and that spouses will often come to their rescue with the answers. You might want to ask the same questions later in the day or when the spouse is not present to see if you receive a different answer.

3. Poor grooming/personal hygiene – soiled clothing:

Are his or her clothes clean and well-kept? Has he forgotten to add a belt; has she forgotten to change out of her slippers and passes it off as “being comfortable” or are they wearing the same outfit over and over again?

Does your parent or loved one show signs of deteriorating hygiene such as body odor, bad breath (from lack of brushing teeth or soaking dentures), or unkempt hair? Is he clean-shaven?

Are there signs of incontinence? Check the bedding and mattress.

4. Spoiled/outdated or foods with very little nutritious value in the home:

You have my permission to snoop in the refrigerator and raid the cupboards.

In the refrigerator, is there anything nutritious IN the refrigerator or is it relatively empty? Are the foods that are present still edible or is the package of sliced turkey from the deli clearly past its prime? Check the expiration dates of the perishable items. When I checked the refrigerator of a relative of mine, there were salad dressings that had expired THREE years earlier. Are the foods nutritious or are you seeing half-eaten cans of tomato soup or Spagetti-Os?

In the pantry, check the expiration dates. Check nutritional value – several boxes of cereal or multiple packs of top ramen are not a good sign. You might also check the trash to see if any of the nutritionally sound items are actually being used. Again, keep in mind that changes in habit are what matter most. If your parent has always used canned soup to make casseroles, then a multitude of cans of soup might not be of concern.

5. Unopened Mail and Past Due Bills:

Are there stacks of mail on the counter or thrown in a drawer? If you happen to look at the mail, are there envelopes with the tell-tale past due colored envelopes in the stack? Determining financial problems in an aging parent is difficult because they are usually very reluctant to discuss them. If available, glance through their checkbook. Has your parent mentioned that “somehow” the electricity was shut off recently? Have you ever tried to call them and received an “out-of-service” recording? All of these are serious warning signs.

6. Poor housekeeping/home maintenance – unsafe conditions:

Is your loved one’s home as tidy as it should be? Of course, as seniors age, their surroundings won’t be as tidy as they once were, but still should be clean. One woman I know was surprised to find tiny cockroaches scurrying into the corners of her mother’s pantry. Another could tell that her father hadn’t mowed the lawn in weeks and the gardens were full of weeds.

Speaking of homes, how is your loved-one's mobility? Should grab bars be installed in the bathrooms and showers? (There are some lovely designer grab bars available now.) Are there items such as throw rugs that should be removed because they could become a fall hazard? Is there a night-light in the hallway to help keep overnight bathroom visits safe? Are the locks on the doors functional?

Do you see bruising on your parent or loved one? I'm not suggesting abuse here. Some medications, like Coumadin or other blood thinners, can cause bruising but bruises are also a sign that falls are occurring. This is another item that elders are reluctant to disclose and their spouses will often cover up for them in this regard, as well. They know that admitting to falling may worry their offspring and affect their independence.

7. Mishandled Medications:

The average senior takes about 7 different medications (including both prescribed and over-the-counter varieties). 58% of all seniors make some kind of medication error with 26% making mistakes with potentially dangerous consequences.

Do you know FOR CERTAIN that your parent or loved one is taking their medications correctly? Do they use a 7 Day pill container or receive their medications from a pharmacy that packages them in a daily “pop-out” card?

I thought my father was managing well with his medications. He knew the names of his prescriptions, the description of the pill, the reason it was prescribed and the dosage. He spent over an hour each week organizing them into his 7 Day container. One day I decided to check his work and was sad to see that he had doubled up certain tablets on certain days, omitted a pill, or completely forgotten to take any of the prescribed tablets during the morning or evening of a particular day. Needless to say, I took over his medication administration.

It's estimated that more than ten million senior citizens require some level of help in their daily living, ranging from simple chores to more complex caretaking.

You may find that your aging parent or loved one needs very little help or you may find that without help, they are close to placing themselves in a dangerous situation.

Fortunately, there are many more options available to family caregivers that will enable them to help their aging family members stay safely in their homes as long as possible.

On this page is just a simple list of what medical and non-medical services are now available to family caregivers.

- Adult Day Care/Respite Care
- Bill payment/Household Financial Management
- Companion Services
- Geriatric Assessment & Care Management
- Home Monitoring
- Homemaker Services
- House Cleaning
- Hospice Services
- Live-In Home Care
- Meal Preparation and/or Delivery
- Occupational Services
- On-line Coordination of Care Centers
- Personal Care
- PERS (Personal Emergency Response Systems)
- Physical Therapy
- Transportation (non-emergency or non-medical)
- Home Health Care – Nursing

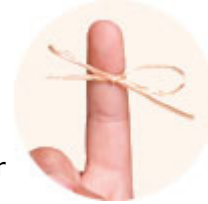
I also wanted to include the Alzheimer's Association's List of 10 Warning Signs of Alzheimer's Disease. If you suspect your loved one has some of these signs, visit <http://Alz.org> to learn more about the condition and to print out a helpful guide to take with you and your loved one to the physician's office.

10 warning signs of Alzheimer's:

1

Memory loss that disrupts daily life

One of the most common signs of Alzheimer's is memory loss, especially forgetting recently learned information. Others include forgetting important dates or events; asking for the same information over and over; relying on memory aides (e.g., reminder notes or electronic devices) or family members for things they used to handle on their own.



What's a typical age-related change? Sometimes forgetting names or appointments, but remembering them later.

2

Challenges in planning or solving problems

Some people may experience changes in their ability to develop and follow a plan or work with numbers. They may have trouble following a familiar recipe or keeping track of monthly bills. They may have difficulty concentrating and take much longer to do things than they did before.



What's a typical age-related change? Making occasional errors when balancing a checkbook.

3

Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work or at leisure

People with Alzheimer's often find it hard to complete daily tasks. Sometimes, people may have trouble driving to a familiar location, managing a budget at work or remembering the rules of a favorite game.

What's a typical age-related change? Occasionally needing help to use the settings on a microwave or to record a television show.



4

Confusion with time or place

People with Alzheimer's can lose track of dates, seasons and the passage of time. They may have trouble understanding something if it is not happening immediately. Sometimes they may forget where they are or how they got there.

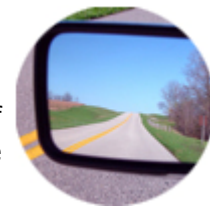


What's a typical age-related change? Getting confused about the day of the week but figuring it out later.

5

Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships

For some people, having vision problems is a sign of Alzheimer's. They may have difficulty reading, judging distance and determining color or contrast. In terms of perception, they may pass a mirror and think someone else is in the room. They may not realize they are the person in the mirror.



What's a typical age-related change? Vision changes related to cataracts.

6

New problems with words in speaking or writing

People with Alzheimer's may have trouble following or joining a conversation. They may stop in the middle of a conversation and have no idea how to continue or they may repeat themselves. They may struggle with vocabulary, have problems finding the right word or call things by the wrong name (e.g., calling a "watch" a "hand-clock").



What's a typical age-related change? Sometimes having trouble finding the right word.

7

Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps

A person with Alzheimer's disease may put things in unusual places. They may lose things and be unable to go back over their steps to find them again.

Sometimes, they may accuse others of stealing. This may occur more frequently over time.

What's a typical age-related change? Misplacing things from time to time, such as a pair of glasses or the remote control.



8

Decreased or poor judgment

People with Alzheimer's may experience changes in judgment or decision-making. For example, they may use poor judgment when dealing with money, giving large amounts to telemarketers. They may pay less attention to grooming or keeping themselves clean.



What's a typical age-related change? Making a bad decision once in a while.

9

Withdrawal from work or social activities

A person with Alzheimer's may start to remove themselves from hobbies, social activities, work projects or sports. They may have trouble keeping up with a favorite sports team or remembering how to complete a favorite hobby. They may also avoid being social because of the changes they have experienced.

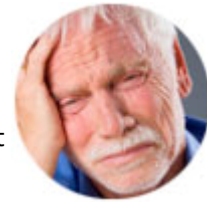


What's a typical age-related change? Sometimes feeling weary of work, family and social obligations.

10

Changes in mood and personality

The mood and personalities of people with Alzheimer's can change. They can become confused, suspicious, depressed, fearful or anxious. They may be easily upset at home, at work, with friends or in places where they are out of their comfort zone.



What's a typical age-related change? Developing very specific ways of doing things and becoming irritable when a routine is disrupted.

The difference between Alzheimer's and typical age-related changes

Signs of Alzheimer's	Typical age-related changes
Poor judgment and decision making	Making a bad decision once in a while
Inability to manage a budget	Missing a monthly payment
Losing track of the date or the season	Forgetting which day it is and remembering later
Difficulty having a conversation	Sometimes forgetting which word to use
Misplacing things and being unable to retrace steps to find them	Losing things from time to time

About The Author

Shelley Webb is a registered nurse and founder of The Intentional Caregiver. Having taken care of her father, who suffered from dementia and congestive heart failure in her home until he passed away at the age of 88, she is well-experienced in eldercare and the trials, tribulations and blessings that come along with caregiving.



Shelley's passion is to support seniors and their caregivers by offering them education, encouragement and empowerment. In her free time, she enjoys gardening, studying wine and taking dance classes.

Find out more at [The Intentional Caregiver.com](http://TheIntentionalCaregiver.com).

You can also follow Shelley on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

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