

AGING *with an Attitude*

Holidays ... a time to check on mom and dad!



By Dorie U. Sugay

Dorie Sugay is the Executive Director of Visiting Angels, a company that provides living-assistance services to seniors and adults-in-need who wish to stay in their own home or receive one-on-one care within a facility.

Having immigrated to the United States from the Islands, I recall savoring the fresh cool smell of the breeze and the fresh air in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I remember fondly the preparation for the holidays and seeing people that I wished I could have seen more often. That's what makes winter and the holidays so special.

The holidays have an effect on our emotions. While some folks look forward to the holidays and being with family, others experience a high level of anxiety. If you are one of the latter, you'll want to try to get rid of the bad memories and make wonderful new ones. That will take a little work but it is doable. A good place to start is with your relationship with your parent(s). If they are getting up there in years, you'll want to "make a list and check it twice" when you see them. Become aware of how they are really doing. Unless you are paying close attention and visiting your parent(s) regularly, you may have missed some obvious signs that they need you more than they say.

In a society that values independence, it is common for parents to claim that life is great so as not to worry their family or impose on them. Many seniors think that admitting they need help sets in motion a process that might end with them in "a home." Even the most confident, still-seemingly-strong parent can justify reasons why you should not know that they need help.

The following are some of the signs that might indicate that your aging loved one may need assistance:

Personal Hygiene is "not up to par." If they are afraid of falling, they may skip bathing. Are they repeatedly wearing the same clothing? Doing the laundry may have become physically challenging. Failure to keep up with their daily grooming routine could indicate health problems. Please don't assume they just "got lazy." Dementia, depression or physical impairments may be behind it.

Losing Weight without trying is not a good sign! Ask questions before you rush them to the doctor. Maybe they are having difficulty cooking or have lost the desire to cook or their arthritic hands can't grasp

the cooking utensils. Age-related social changes may affect their food intake as well. Some would cut down on food to cut down on expenses! You really need to ask a few questions to get to the why!

Increased Isolation

When your loved one starts to live like a hermit, declining invitations, refusing to see family and friends, uninterested in activities they used to engage in – probe. Have you been getting calls at odd hours? Those may be a cry for help and a sign of depression or isolation.

Change In Housekeeping Habits

If they used to be neat and orderly and now there is clutter everywhere, piles of newspapers and magazines, etc. –ask questions. Loss of energy and interest in general activities is a sign that they need help.

Unpaid Bills

Sometimes the simple act of opening mail can be too tough on a senior. Sometimes it is memory loss – they were getting ready to pay bills, got distracted and forgot. Sometimes they put off working on the bills because they can't see too well (an undetected macular degeneration?)

Difficulty Getting Around

If they are experiencing difficulty moving, they are likely to experience difficulty caring for themselves. If they give you the "it's just aging" answer when you ask questions – don't just accept that. Is it muscle weakness, joint problems? Are they choosing to stay put because they can't see their way around? Sometimes the root cause of a problem is not so obvious!

Changes In Sleeping Patterns

Episodes of narcolepsy or sleeping the majority of the time are not normal.

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Increased Memory Loss

Are you noticing that they are repeating themselves a lot more? Have you observed confusion? Have they been forgetting their medications? Are some of the bottoms of their pots or pans scorched? What was the reason they missed their last doctor's appointment? The onset of combativeness or excessive aggressive behavior, inappropriate behavior and speech in day-to-day situations or when questioned about memory lapses will tug at you like a 3 year old who wants your attention.

Signs of Depression

Listen to the way they talk. Depression is widespread but that does not mean it is OK to just accept it. "She won't do anything!" is a common frustration. Don't get frustrated, dig into it. Help them get help.

What to do?

Talk with them about your concerns. Assure them that you want to help make sure they can stay in their own place for as long as possible. Remember that they may be afraid that you would "put them away." Gather information. Sometimes the solution is within the walls of their home – getting a caregiver to keep them company and help them with meal preparation, medication reminder, light housekeeping, etc. If they are still able to function well, there are companion-type caregivers, by the way. Sometimes the need is not for physical assistance but emotional support! Or sometimes the house just needs to be re-organized, prepped for safety. Or maybe they just need assistance devices. Other times, the answer needs to come from their doctor.

If your parent(s) won't work with you on a solution, start with a call to their physician. Physicians don't just recommend medically-based solutions – if they think your loved one needs a caregiver, they will say so (and even give you an idea if they think you need to hire 24/7 help or just a few hours a week). Very often, when a physician makes a recommendation, the elderly listens! There are also Geriatric Care Managers or Certified Senior Advisors to consult with.

THIS HOLIDAY -

When you visit your parent(s), make a list and check it twice. Even if you see them through the year, if you do so in a rush, slow down this holiday and really pay attention to their true needs. Be compassionate as you probe, but probe you must. There is no dignity in a life that is substandard, but there is dignity in finding ways to maintain independence – even if it means re-defining the parameters of what independence means! Give them the best gift you can this holiday – love them enough to probe and get them help if they need it.

Disclaimer: This article is for informational purposes only and does not claim to provide all that there is to know about long-term care. The opinions expressed in this article are that of the author and independent of the magazine or Visiting Angels.

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