

The Top 10 signs your parents need help at home

And how to talk to them about it



According to the Pew Research Center, about 52 percent of those with parents ages 65 to 74, and 64 percent with parents 75 and older lend a hand because their parents need help. But what are the signs parents need more assistance than you can provide?

Do your parents exhibit any of these signs?

1. The yard and house lack upkeep.
2. The inside of the house becomes uncharacteristically cluttered, disorganized or dirty.
3. There's a stack of unpaid bills.
4. They appear disheveled; for example, their clothes are unclean or their hygiene has declined.
5. There is hardly any food in the house.
6. There has been a change in their general mood, or they've lost interest in hobbies and activities.
7. They forget to take their medications or get prescriptions filled.
8. They have unexplained bruising, which could indicate they've been falling.
9. They have become more forgetful, perhaps missing essential appointments.
10. They have noticeably gained or lost weight.

Getting ready for "the talk"

You might think you've already tackled the trickiest conversation ever with a family member—the one about the birds and bees with your preteens. But there's another talk that no one feels prepared to have.

With your parents well into retirement years, the awkward conversation today is about whether, when, and how you, your siblings, and a home care agency should take on some or all of their care.

If not handled delicately, the conversation can turn into an emotional tug of war. You could wind up on one side, battling to protect your parents' health and safety. Your parents could brace themselves on the opposite end of the rope, fighting to preserve their independence. Clearly, the emotional stakes are high, as are the chances for misunderstandings and bruised feelings. It's no wonder many put off this conversation for as long as possible.

If you've noted your parents' difficulties with the routines of daily life, rest assured that the conversation will go more smoothly if it happens before a crisis forces everyone to make decisions on the fly.

Timing is everything

When should I have the talk?"

Gerontologist Alexis Abramson, author of *The Caregiver's Survival Handbook: How to Care for Your Aging Parent Without Losing Yourself*, says a good time to gather facts and understand your healthy parents aging wishes is at age 65.

Even if you do wait for a medical diagnosis to begin thinking about your parents' home care needs, take action early. The conversation should happen when any chronic disease is identified so you can start planning on needs. If a loved one has just been diagnosed with Alzheimer's but is still reasonably functional, start the conversation then.

How do I break the ice?

It's usually best to make the conversation at least a two-stage process, with the first stage a break-the-ice dialogue just to get the lines of communication going between you and your parents. To improve communication and better understand your parents' point of view, keep in mind:

- One of the most threatening things to a senior who has been proud to live on his or her own is the possibility of leaving home and losing independence.
- What seniors typically don't know is that there are non-medical home care services to assist them with activities of daily living (for example, light housekeeping, transportation, bathing and grooming) that will enable them to remain living in their home safely and independently.
- A parent may be in denial and refuse to admit they need help. This will create additional challenges.

How do I broach the touchy topic?

Write a letter. "Many people write a letter before the conversation. This allows the parent to privately take in all the concerns prior to discussing," Abramson says.

Lead with love. Remind your parents how they lovingly cared for their own parents. Saying "I love and respect you, so let's discuss the best options that will allow you to safely stay at home. I know you will continue to thrive by living in the home you love," is a great place to begin.

Share resources. Print out articles or reference what a friend is dealing with as a caregiver. Start in a gentle way.

Focus on your parents' quality of life. Let them know you're there to protect their independence.

Avoid preconceived notions. "Don't go in with preconceived notions of what your parents might say," write Hugh Delehanty and Elinor Ginzler in *Caring for Your Parent: The Complete AARP Guide*.

Conversation starters

Use benevolent probing to start conversations so your parent doesn't get on the defensive:

"Can I get your opinion on a couple of things, Mom?"

"I heard of a service that can send a person to cook lunch for seniors. What do you think of this idea?"

"Dad, I'm really worried about you falling on the stairs; you've tripped a couple of times. How can I help keep you safe?"

"Mom, can we spend five minutes jotting down ideas about getting someone else to do some work in the house? I made us some tea."

I've broken the ice. What happens next?

After you've broken the ice, you can arrange for a separate nuts-and-bolts conversation—a family meeting with your older loved one included—to discuss specifics. To avoid resentment, include all the people who care about your parents in discussions about their care.

Delehanty and Ginzler offer the following tips for family meetings:

- If possible, hold the meeting at your parents' or loved one's home or someplace where they feel comfortable.
- Try to schedule the meeting at a time when most family members can attend in person. Include those who live far away by arranging a conference call.
- If your parent or loved one has resisted talking about caregiving issues, consider asking a third party to help, such as a clergy member or social worker.
- Create a list of questions or topics in advance, including the location of your parent or loved one's critical legal, financial and medical documents.



Why not start today?

As you join with your loved ones and family to plan for medical, financial and daily living needs that lie ahead, you've taken an important step. One day your loved one's needs will change, and you won't be forced to guess his or her wishes regarding medical care or financial matters. Even better, you've drawn your family together so you can support each other through life's changes.

Make talks a family affair

Once you've located the necessary papers, it's time to discuss how to divvy up the caregiving responsibilities.

"You need to talk to your family members about what kind of role they want to play," Abramson says. "And treat caregiving like it's a business. There should be someone who's the CEO, who delegates responsibilities, but in a way that will motivate. For example, just because your brother is an accountant doesn't mean he wants to handle your parents' finances."

Don't do it alone

If you and your family can't meet all of your loved one's needs to remain independent and maintain a high quality of life, it's good to know SYNERGY HomeCare offers a variety of services that can fill the gap.