



Assessing the Situation

As people age, their needs and capabilities will change. They may have trouble getting around the house, or difficulty driving. They may not remember things as easily as they once did. And adult children of aging parents may notice that Mom or Dad are having difficulty—with their finances, perhaps, or with personal hygiene. We all want to support our older loved ones' desire to continue living independently, even when we have concerns about their safety and well-being. But how do we know when it's time to intervene?

Fortunately, there are good assessment tools and professional consultants available to older people and their family members to help decide when an older adult needs assistance. An assessment is a comprehensive review of a person's mental, physical, environmental, and financial condition to establish his or her ability to remain safely independent. It identifies risks and helps determine options to reduce them.

How Do I Know if They Need Help?

While it is possible for families to complete assessments on their own using standard forms, there also are experienced professionals who can help. Although different forms and professionals will offer slight variations, here are some basic areas you may want to cover:

- **Physical Health.** Have they been diagnosed with any chronic diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis, or emphysema? Or other diseases, such as bowel or bladder problems, heart disease, stroke or cancer? Do they have vision or hearing problems, excessive weight loss, or difficulty walking? Be sure and include a list of health professionals they currently see, and any recent hospitalizations.
- **Mental Health.** Have they been diagnosed with any psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety or psychosis? Have they been diagnosed with Alzheimer's or other form of dementia? Are they showing signs of confusion, disorientation or isolation?
- **Medication Use.** What medications are they currently taking, and what is the dosage? Are they taking their medication as directed?
- **Daily Living Skills.** Are they able to dress, bathe, get up from a chair, use a toilet, climb stairs, use the phone? Do they know how to get help in an emergency? Can they shop, prepare meals, do housework and yard work? Can they safely drive?

- **Home and Community Safety.** How safe is their neighborhood? Does their home have smoke alarms and can they hear them adequately? Can they avoid telephone and door-to-door fraud?
- **Support Systems.** Do your older loved ones have frequent visitors or see friends? Do they go to a Senior Center, or get out of the house for other social reasons? Do family members live close by? Do they keep names, addresses and phone numbers of key friends and family members they can call in an emergency?
- **Appearance and Hygiene.** How is their overall appearance? Do they dress appropriately in clean clothes?
- **Finances.** Can they live on their current income? Are there any legal documents such as trusts, living wills, and/or durable power of attorney? Do they pay bills on time and make informed financial decisions?
- **Interests/Lifestyles.** Do they engage in their favorite hobbies, read books, watch their favorite TV shows, exercise, play a musical instrument, go to church, keep up with their friends? Are they still engaged in the activities they have always enjoyed?

It's not always easy to recognize when an older loved one needs help. Learning how to assess their needs will make it easier to know when, and how, to help.