



Caregiver's Answers, Topics, and Helpful Information

In an effort to continually assist caregivers in their search for pertinent information regarding eldercare, our Family Caregiver Support Coordinator addresses topics of most frequently asked questions via **Caregiver's Answers, Topics and Helpful Information (CATHI)**. Additionally, caregivers are also invited to e-mail individual questions to the Family Caregiver Support Coordinator at caregiver2@senior-resources-guilford.org.

How do I know when my family member can no longer live safely at home?

A common question asked by caregivers, how do I know when it's time to make a change?

It is urged that family caregivers have a system already put into place to help avoid a crisis. Personal emergency response systems, adult day services, home health aides, telephone check-in services, Meals on Wheels, volunteer programs all can help keep your loved one stay safe.

According to Reader's Digest there are 9 warning signs your loved one should not be living alone anymore:

- 1. They've suddenly lost a large amount of weight.** If you notice your loved one is looking thinner than usual, it may be a sign that they are not eating well, which could be the sign of a cognitive illness. Lisa Gwyther, director of Duck University's Family Support Program explains that people suffering from a memory impairment, such as Alzheimer's, often either forget to eat certain meals or forget how to properly manage and cook their food, causing them to lose weight.
- 2. Their home is stacked with unopened mail.** Towering heaps of unopened mail can be another indication of a growing impairment. Gwyther says to keep a close eye out for mail that has not been opened from creditors and charities your loved one would not normally donate to. This can be a red flag that they have lost control of their judgement when it comes to smart spending, which can drive them into debt rapidly if it goes unnoticed.
- 3. They are ignoring their personal hygiene.** For someone who is living with Alzheimer's or dementia, remembering all the cognitive steps involved with taking a shower every day is not

always the no-brainer you believe it would be. It could be difficult for them to understand why they need to take a shower and how to do it, and this could result in your loved one living with an unhealthy hygiene routine.

4. They get lost when going to familiar places. Common destinations like the grocery store, the bank, or church could be common routes for your loved one. If it becomes apparent they can no longer make their way to these destinations, it is a red flag that something is wrong and changing. Gwyther explains that if you can no longer trust your loved one's ability to navigate their own town, it might be time to discuss different options.

5. You notice changes in their home. A cluttered house is not necessarily a bad sign if your loved one was always a bit messy. However, if they suddenly begin letting order slide after a long time of cleanliness, it might be a sign of an underlying cognitive issue. Additionally, watch out for items showing up in strange places around the home, like a gallon of milk in the dishwasher instead of the refrigerator.

6. Their internet habits have shifted. For those with Internet-savvy loved ones, be on the lookout for any strange or unusual new online habits, as this could be a signal of dementia or another similar illness. "People who are cognitively declining are at a real risk of ordering things they don't need, taking on debt, and facing identity theft," Gwyther says. Even if they have been on the Internet for years and seem perfectly fine, families should be monitoring unusual habits. You could also look at their Facebook for clues and make sure they are not befriending people who could be potentially dangerous, because it is hard for them to know who a friend is and who is fake.

7. They are always exhausted. Dementia, Alzheimer's, and other chronic conditions can be extremely exhausting, keeping your loved one up all night and drowsy all day. As Gwyther explains, sleep is vital for both cognitive and physical functioning, and missing out on much-needed sleep can make your loved one's condition even more serious.

8. They have a strange collection of new medications. If your loved one's medication cabinet is suddenly filled with unusual or possibly unnecessary medications, a cognitive impairment could be the explanation. Gwyther explains, that many patients with diseases like dementia or Alzheimer's will often accidentally misuse over-the-counter medications, as they are trying to treat something that is not really there. Gwyther also states, make sure your loved one is taking the medications that they do need, and that they are taking them at appropriate times. If month-old bottles of their daily medication are sitting around completely full, it might be because they no longer can remember to take them.

9. **They are defensive.** As extreme as it might seem, Gwyther says there have been many instances of aging people in cognitive decline purchasing guns to keep in their home for protection, even if they never owned a gun previously. With a disease like dementia, people often become suspicious of those around them including family as they cannot distinguish who is trying to help them and who is trying to hurt them. Having a gun in the house, mace or even a hammer by the door can be incredibly dangerous for someone who is cognitively impaired. This can be a sign the individual should not be living alone.

In addition, AARP has checklist available to help make changes in your loved one's living environment (eliminating throw rugs, improving lighting, modifying the bathroom with grab bars and bath chairs). <http://www.aarp.org/universalhome/home.html>

Often, a loved one will resist changed. Usually what is behind their resistance is fear. Respect and recognize that these changes will be difficult for your loved one. Start slowly, involve your loved one, when appropriate, in any discussions and decisions, ask for your loves one's commitment to try any services for a month. Allow your loved one to vent, without judgments and recriminations. Reassure your loved one that these services will keep him or her safe, and if you can let them remain safely in the home, let them know you will work with them to achieve this goal.

If your loved one is not cognitively impaired and still refuses, then back off, at least for the time being. **However, do not give up.** Contact local organizations (such as Senior Resources of Guilford, your local Family Caregiver Support Program, home health agencies, Meals on Wheels, assisted living facilities, and rehab centers) for information about their services, costs, an availability. In case a crisis occurs, you will have the information you need about your community services in order to make a good decision about your loved one's future.

The information in this article was adapted from FAQs of Caregiving, caregiver.com, 2018.

The information in this article was adapted from Reader's Digest, 9 Warning Signs Your elderly Parent Shouldn't be Living Alone Anymore, February, 2018.

****If you would like to join our mailing list to learn more about programs and services available to you contact our Family Caregiver Support Coordinator at caregiver2@senior-resources-guilford.org***

For referrals to community organizations in Guilford County that assist older adults and caregivers, contact Senior Resources of Guilford's SeniorLine at (336) 884-6981 in High Point, all other areas (336) 333-6981 or the Caregiver Support Coordinator, at (336) 373-4816 in Greensboro or (336) 883-3586 in High Point.

