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Aging Parents: Seven Warning Signs of Health Problems

Concerned about your aging parents' health? Use this guide to gauge how your aging parents are doing — and what to do if they need help. As your parents get older, how can you be sure they're successfully taking care of themselves and staying healthy? When you visit your aging parents, ask yourself the following questions. Then, if necessary, take steps to help your aging parents maintain their independence.

1. Are your aging parents taking care of themselves?

Pay attention to your parents' appearance. Are their clothes clean? Do they appear to be taking good care of themselves? Failure to keep up with daily routines — such as bathing, tooth brushing and other basic grooming — could indicate dementia, depression or physical impairments.

Also pay attention to your parents' home. Are the lights working? Is the heat on? Are the bathrooms clean? Is the yard overgrown? Any big changes in the way your parents do things around the house could provide clues to their health. For example, scorched pots could mean your parents are forgetting about food cooking on the stove. Neglected housework could be a sign of depression, dementia or other concerns.

2. Are your aging parents experiencing memory loss?

Everyone forgets things from time to time. Modest memory problems are a fairly common part of aging, and sometimes medication side effects or underlying conditions contribute to memory loss. There's a difference, though, between normal changes in memory and the type of memory loss associated with Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia. Consider your aging parents. Are memory changes limited to misplaced glasses or an occasionally forgotten appointment? Or are memory changes more concerning, such as forgetting common words when speaking, getting lost in familiar neighborhoods or being unable to follow directions? If you're concerned about memory loss for either of your aging parents, schedule an evaluation with the doctor.

3. Are your aging parents safe in their home?

Take a look around your parents' home, keeping an eye out for any red flags. Do your parents have difficulty navigating a narrow stairway? Has either parent fallen recently? Are they able to read directions on medication containers?

4. Are your aging parents safe on the road?

Driving can sometimes be challenging for older adults. If your aging parents become confused while driving or you're concerned about their ability to drive safely, it might be time to stop driving. To help your aging parents maintain their independence, suggest other transportation options — such as taking the bus, using a van service, hiring a driver or taking advantage of other local transportation options.

5. Have your aging parents lost weight?

Losing weight without trying could be a sign that something's wrong. For aging parents, weight loss could be related to many factors, including:

- **Difficulty cooking.** Your parents could be having difficulty finding the energy to cook, grasping the tools necessary to cook, or reading labels or directions on food products.
- **Loss of taste or smell.** Your parents might not be interested in eating if food doesn't taste or smell as good as it used to.
- **Underlying conditions.** Sometimes weight loss indicates a serious underlying condition, such as malnutrition, dementia, depression or cancer.

If you're concerned about unexplained weight loss for either of your aging parents, schedule an evaluation with the doctor.

6. Are your aging parents in good spirits?

Note your parents' moods and ask how they're feeling. A drastically different mood or outlook could be a sign of depression or other health concerns. Also talk to your parents about their activities. Are they connecting with friends? Have they maintained interest in hobbies and other daily activities? Are they involved in organizations or clubs? If you're concerned about your parents' moods, schedule an evaluation. Depression can be treated at any age.

7. Are your aging parents able to get around?

Pay attention to how your parents are walking. Are they reluctant or unable to walk usual distances? Is knee or hip arthritis making it difficult to get around the house? Would either parent benefit from a cane or walker? Issues such as muscle weakness and joint pain can make it difficult to move around as well. If your parents are unsteady on their feet, they might be at risk of falling — a major cause of disability among older adults.

Taking action

There are many steps you can take to ensure your aging parents' health and well-being, even if you live far away. For example:

- **Share your concerns with your parents.** Talk to your parents openly and honestly. Knowing that you're concerned about their health might give your parents the motivation they need to see a doctor or make other changes. Consider including other people who care about your parents in the conversation, such as other loved ones, close friends or clergy.
- **Encourage regular medical checkups.** If you're worried about a parent's weight loss, depressed mood, or other signs and symptoms, encourage your parent to schedule a doctor's visit. You might offer to schedule the visit yourself or to accompany your parent to the doctor — or to find someone else to attend the visit. Ask about follow-up visits as well.
- **Address safety issues.** Point out any potential safety issues to your parents — then make a plan to address the problems. For example, perhaps your parents could use assistive devices to help them reach items on high shelves or to help them stay steady on their feet. A higher toilet seat or handrails in the bathroom might help prevent falls.
- **Consider home care services.** If your aging parents are having trouble taking care of themselves, perhaps you could hire someone to clean the house and run errands. A home health care aide could help your parents with daily activities such as bathing and dressing. You might also consider Meals on Wheels or other community services. If remaining at home is too challenging, you might suggest moving to an assisted living facility.
- **Contact the doctor for guidance.** If your parents dismiss your concerns, consider contacting the doctor directly. Your insights can help the doctor understand what to look for during upcoming visits. Keep in mind that the doctor might need to verify that he or she has permission to speak with you about your parents' care, which might include a signed form or waiver from your parents.
- **Seek help from local agencies.** Your local agency on aging — which you can find using the Eldercare Locator, a public service of the Administration on Aging — can connect you with services in your parents' area. For example, the county in which your parents live might have social workers who can evaluate your parents' needs and put them in touch with pertinent services, such as home care workers and help with meals and transportation.

Sometimes aging parents won't admit they need help around the house, and others don't realize they need help. That's where you come in. Remind your parents that you care about them and that you want to do what's best to promote their health and well-being, both today and in the months and years to come.



Relationships That Last

Good relationships nourish us. Research shows they boost happiness, improve health and lower stress.

Like flowers, relationships need care to grow. When life gets busy, our relationships may suffer. We may feel we simply don't have the time to spend on our relationships, between working, parenting and running a household. If this sounds familiar, try these tips and watch your relationships thrive:

- **Be proactive.** Don't wait until you have time; make time. Make an appointment in your calendar to spend time with a loved one – and honor that time.
- **Save time.** Running your household wisely can give you more time to spend with your loved ones. To save time, try automating your finances or asking family (or hiring someone) to help with chores. Cooking in large batches (and freezing the rest for later) and using subscription, delivery or pickup services may also help.
- **Run errands together.** The next time you need to run an errand, try taking a family member or friend along. For instance, go to the gym together, visit the farmers' market or take the dog for a walk.
- **Work smarter.** Is work taking over your personal time? Try asking others to help when you can and always have a backup. Remember to set boundaries between work and personal time – and defend those boundaries. Before saying yes to a project, think about whether you can finish it during work hours.
- **Spend time wisely.** Sometimes, we spend a lot of time on things that don't add any real value to our life, such as surfing the Web. Limit those activities and spend that time with your loved ones instead.

Beyond these time management tips, you can also strengthen your bond with your loved ones in other ways:

- **Show gratitude.** When was the last time you told your spouse, "I love you"? Or told a friend how grateful you are for her friendship? Saying thank you can brighten a loved one's day – and the reaction you may get can brighten yours.
- **Make someone's life better.** Every day, ask yourself what you can do for five minutes to make a loved one's day better. Maybe your spouse is nervous about a big presentation and could use a few kind words. Or a friend is going through a divorce and needs your support.
- **Reach out often.** Every bit of contact helps to keep a relationship going. If you're really pressed for time, send your loved one a brief message to check in. Or make a quick phone call. Keep in mind that technology can make it easier to connect with our loved ones, but there's nothing quite like meeting in person.

- **Be a good listener.** Want to be a better listener – and a better friend, parent and partner? Avoid interrupting your loved one, trying to top his or her story, giving advice off the bat, becoming defensive, or not giving your loved one your full attention. During a conversation, remember to repeat what someone says every so often, keep eye contact, uncross your arms, lean in – and really listen.
- **Fight smart.** Yes, conflict is a natural part of a relationship. In the strongest relationships, people know how to fight and resolve conflict. The next time things get tense, try these phrases to cool things off:
 - “What can I do to make you feel better?”
 - “Go on.”
 - “I can see my part in this.”
 - “I love you.”
 - “That makes sense.”
 - “Please tell me what’s going on.”
 - “I need some time to calm down so I’ll listen better.”

Start using these tips, and you may see your bond with a loved one grow stronger.



Family Feud – Repairing Damaged Family Relationships

Sometimes, it starts small: your brother puts you on hold while he takes a call from his new girlfriend—and forgets you’re waiting on the line; your mother-in-law criticizes your parenting skills; your sister regularly expects you to make the hour-long drive to see her.

Hurt feelings and disappointments can build over time, until one day family members simply stop communicating. One day turns into a month, then a year, then many years. In that type of charged silence, repairing a damaged relationship may seem beyond hope.

The Olive Branch

In some cases, no matter how long and hard you try, the other person may hold a grudge for a lifetime. But, more often than not, mending a relationship may be possible if you can summon some patience, kind words and compassion.

- **Start with forgiveness.** Forgiveness is the decision to let go of resentment and vengeful thinking. It doesn’t mean you deny the other person’s responsibility for hurting you, and doesn’t minimize or justify the wrong. Forgiveness can be powerful—leading to less stress and hostility, lower blood pressure and other benefits.¹
- **Look for the good in the person.** When you are upset with someone, it’s hard to see that person in a positive light. But focusing on someone’s positive traits may soften your anger. Maybe your brother is a really good father to his son. Maybe your sister takes great care of your ailing mother.
- **Be the bigger person.** In a stalemate, someone has to make the first move to mend the relationship. Why should I have to do it? you may wonder. I didn’t do anything wrong. He should apologize first. Do you value being right more than you value the relationship—and all the happy memories you could be creating? Plus, almost no situation is entirely one person’s fault. Which brings us to ...
- **Try to see the other side of the story.** Keep in mind that the other person probably has some points you need to consider. If someone is no longer speaking to you or flew off the handle, some interaction probably played a role in that. Look for what you could have handled better and accept responsibility for your actions. That being said, be careful not to take the blame for unrealistic expectations, someone else’s choices or situations that are out of your control.
- **Provide reassurance.** When reaching out to your family member, reassure him that you love him and want to start fixing things and seeing his side. Explain that the feud is not as big as your love for him. If you need to apologize, do so.
- **Identify the real issue.** The real source of conflict may not be what someone says it is. Instead of focusing on the presumed “problem,” look instead to what is being felt—the concerns, fears, expectations, needs, desires, hopes of the other person. Ask questions, verify or clarify all assumptions, get the other person’s side of the story and find out how your behavior has affected him or her.

- **Use your words.** Using certain phrases, such as the ones below, can help defuse conflict:
 - “I see what you mean.”
 - “Ok, you have a point.”
 - “I’m wondering if…”
 - “Tell me more about that.”
 - “What I hear you saying is…”
- **Give it time.** If your family member rejects your request to talk, allow some space and try again from time to time. Try not to expect anything in return for your efforts to reach out. Do what you have to do to feel true to yourself without being resentful of the effort you are putting in to mend the relationship.
- **Go for counseling together.** A therapist can help both of you identify the root of the issue and teach you tools to improve communication. (If you are already in therapy, consider seeking out a new therapist for joint counseling sessions.) Sometimes, ongoing family contact can be unhealthy. Seeing a therapist on your own or talking to another insightful third party can help you decide what to do if you’re unsure about cutting ties.
- **Don’t involve the children.** If there are children caught in the middle, continue to let them know you care and are there for them.

When to say goodbye

Trying to mend a broken relationship can be emotionally draining, especially if someone is unresponsive to your efforts or continues to treat you poorly. If the situation is creating a lot of stress in your life—and your interactions with the family member are consistently painful—you may want to set some boundaries for your health’s sake. Know how much you can continue to reach out to the person without adversely affecting your health—and don’t overextend yourself. You may also want to consider taking a break from interacting with this person and focus on your own healing and healthy detachment. And remember, your safety comes first. If you suspect that you are the victim of abuse (physical or emotional), either currently or in the past, seek help. If you are uncertain, a therapist may assist you in helping to identify any possible issues. If you are in immediate danger, call 9-1-1.

In relationships, we can’t control how the other person will react to our olive branch. We can control our own actions, however, and do what we feel is right so we can live without regrets.



Single parent? Tips for Raising a Child Alone

Raising a child on your own can be stressful. If you're a single parent, understand how to cope with the pressure, find support and nurture your child.

If you're raising a child on your own, you're in good company. Single-parent families are more common than ever. Know how to manage some of the special challenges single parents experience and what you can do to raise a happy, healthy child.

What are the most common single-parent challenges?

Child rearing can be difficult under any circumstances. Without a partner, the stakes are even higher. As a single parent, you might have sole responsibility for all aspects of day-to-day child care. This can result in added pressure, stress and fatigue. If you're too tired or distracted to be emotionally supportive or consistently discipline your child, behavioral problems might arise. In addition, single-parent families generally have lower incomes and less access to health care. Juggling work and child care can be financially difficult and socially isolating. You might also worry about the lack of a male or female parental role model for your child.

How can a single parent deal with these challenges?

To reduce stress in your single-parent family:

- **Show your love.** Remember to praise your child. Give him or her your unconditional love and support.
- **Create a routine.** Structure — such as regularly scheduled meals and bedtimes — helps your child know what to expect.
- **Prioritize family time.** Set aside time each day to play, read or simply sit with your child.
- **Find quality child care.** Although an older sibling can sometimes care for a younger sibling, don't rely on an older child as your only baby sitter. Be careful about asking a new friend or partner to watch your child. If you need regular child care, look for a qualified caregiver who can provide stimulation in a safe environment.
- **Set reasonable limits.** Explain house rules and expectations to your child — such as speaking respectfully and picking up after yourself — and be careful to enforce them. Work with the other caregivers in your child's life to ensure you're providing consistent discipline. Consider re-evaluating certain limits, such as your child's computer time or curfew, when he or she demonstrates the ability to accept more responsibility.
- **Don't feel guilty.** Don't blame yourself or spoil your child to try to make up for being a single parent.
- **Take care of yourself.** Include physical activity in your daily routine, eat a healthy diet and get plenty of sleep. Arrange time to do activities you enjoy alone or with close friends.

- **Lean on others.** Just because you're a single parent doesn't mean you have to do everything yourself. Work out a carpool schedule with other parents. Join a support group for single parents or seek social services. Call on trusted loved ones, friends and neighbors for help. Faith communities can be helpful resources, too.
- **Stay positive.** Your mood and attitude can affect your child. It's OK to be honest with your child if you're having a difficult time, but remind him or her that things will get better. Try to keep your sense of humor when dealing with everyday challenges.

How should a single parent talk to a child about separation or divorce?

Many single-parent families are the result of divorce or separation. If this is the case in your family, talk to your child about the changes you're facing. Listen to your child's feelings and try to answer his or her questions honestly — avoiding unnecessary details or negativity about the other parent. Remind your child that he or she did nothing to cause the divorce or separation and that you'll always love him or her. A counselor might be able to help you and your child talk about problems, fears or concerns. Try to regularly communicate with your child's other parent about your child's care and well-being to help him or her adapt.

How can a single parent handle dating?

If you're dating, consider the fact that your new romantic partner will have an impact on your child. Look for a partner who will treat both you and your child with respect. Consider waiting until you've established a solid relationship with someone before introducing him or her to your child. When you're ready to make the introduction, explain to your child some of your new partner's positive qualities. Don't expect your new partner and your child to become close immediately, however. Give them time to get to know each other and develop a relationship.

How can a single parent address the lack of a male or female parental role model for a child?

If your child's other parent isn't involved in his or her life, you might worry about the lack of a male or female parental role model in your child's life. To send positive messages about the opposite sex:

- **Look for opportunities to be positive about the opposite sex.** Point out accomplishments or positive characteristics of members of the opposite sex in your family, the community or even the media. Avoid making broad, negative statements about the opposite sex.
- **Contradict negative stereotypes about the opposite sex.** Share an example of a member of the opposite sex who doesn't fit the stereotype.
- **Include in your life members of the opposite sex who aren't romantic partners.** Seek out positive relationships with responsible members of the opposite sex who might serve as role models for your child. Show your child that it's possible to have long-term, positive relationships with members of the opposite sex.

Being a single parent can be a challenging but rewarding experience. By showing your love and respect, talking honestly and staying positive, you can lessen the stress of single parenting and help your child thrive.

**Getting Started is Easy!
Call your EAP for more information**