



The Caregiver's Checklist: Supporting An Aging Parent

Watching a parent transition from caregiver to care receiver is never easy. This can be exacerbated if your parent had a thriving career, was a doting parent, or has a stubborn, independent streak.

But advanced age alone doesn't mean your parent needs to give up his or her independence. It's important to approach the topic with delicacy and take conscious steps to preserve your parent-child relationship. Making this transition involves numerous considerations.

So how do you know when to seek care? And what can you do to help your parent access the right resources at the right time to remain as independent as possible? Our comprehensive caregiver checklist helps you navigate every step of the way.

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Caregiving Checklist

Caregiving guides often assume that all aging parents have the same needs and that all caregivers have time to devote themselves fully to caregiving. But every family is different, just as every individual and situation are different. You'll need to find ways to adapt to your parent's changing needs, and you may need to seek outside help as those needs become more demanding. This checklist will help you ensure the basics are covered.

Environment

A safe home environment can help your parent remain longer in their home—or in yours if they've recently moved in. Make changes that reduce the risk of falls and help your parent take advantage of all the available space. The right environment can also keep your parent healthier longer. Consider the following:



Tripping hazards: Are there loose cords and wires your parent can trip on? What about small steps or dips in the floor? Loose sidewalks and driveways can pose a danger, as can steep inclines. Remove tripping hazards and repair damaged floors and external surfaces. If a step is not obvious, consider blocking it off or even putting up a sign.



Make home tasks accessible: Everyday tasks, such as loading the dishwasher or washing machine, becomes more difficult and even dangerous as we age, particularly if the chore involves a lot of bending. Ensure that the washing machine and dishwasher aren't located on slippery surfaces and have plenty of room around them. A grab bar can help your parent retain their balance.





Bath safety: Bathtubs are slippery, hard, and require aging parents to navigate and turn around in small spaces. It's no wonder that a third of older adult injuries occur while bathing or showering.¹ Several grab bars in the bath tub, anti-slip mats or stickers, a tub that's as wide as possible, and a walk-in shower can improve safety. Modifying the bathtub may be the most important step to keep an aging parent safe.



Emergency assistance: If your parent is in relatively good health, they may spend extended periods of time alone. Nevertheless, your parent needs easy access to prompt emergency care in the event of an emergency. A medical alert button on a bracelet or necklace can give you significant peace of mind. In addition, ensure every room has a phone and that someone checks in on your parent regularly. Your family might consider working out a rotation such that someone stops by twice a day. If you can't do this, try paying a local teen or neighbor a few bucks a week to check in and visit with your parent.



Contacting authorities: Every home needs a smoke detector in every room and a carbon monoxide monitor on each floor. Fires, particularly due to stoves inadvertently left on, are a common cause of senior home fires.² Protect your parent by investing in an alert system that directly contacts the fire department if it detects smoke.



Household Management

When you moved out of your parents' home, you had to master various tasks, such as paying bills, managing your credit, and making your own appointments. It's easy to forget how taxing these tasks can be once they become second nature. As people age, executive functioning and memory tend to decline, even in otherwise healthy people. This can make everyday household management tasks more difficult.

The following strategies can help your parent remain independent while staying on top of everyday duties:

- Set up auto-deposits for any Social Security, pension, or other payments your parent gets. This saves a trip to the bank.
- Automate bill paying with auto debits. If you can, set these payments up to occur on the same day of the month so that your parent knows when the money will leave the account and can budget accordingly.
- Set up banking alerts for when your parent's account balance dips below a certain threshold. The bank can text or email your parent—or you, with your parent's permission—when the account is close to overdrafting.

- At least monthly, do a quick inspection of the home to address broken light bulbs, leaky faucets, and other hazards and inconveniences.
- If you live too far away to regularly visit your parent, consider asking a friend or neighbor to drop by every few days to ensure the house is safe and your parent is functioning well.
- Make a list of daily or weekly tasks for your parent if they show signs of dementia. A visual reminder to wash hands after handling meat, to turn off the stove, or to lock the doors can make independent living possible for longer.

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Medication Management

If your parent has a chronic medical condition, he or she likely needs prescription medications. Managing these medications can be difficult, especially if your parent takes two or more or has to take a drug several times each day. Older adults who forget prescription drugs can suffer life-threatening medical events. Those who take more than the required dose, or who mix the wrong medications, may also be in jeopardy. In fact, fifteen percent of senior hospitalizations involve drug interactions and adverse reactions.³ Help your parent manage prescription medication by:



Making daily dosages easy to remember. A prescription pill dispenser labeled according to day, with slots for times of the day, can help your parent take the required dosage—no more, no less. Make copies of your parent's prescriptions and store them with the pill dispenser. Alternatively, take a photo of each pill, write a brief description, and create a 30-day checklist. For older adults who want to know what they're taking and why, this strategy can be especially helpful.



Making a list of all prescription drugs your parent takes. Bring it with you—or ask your parent to take it—to each and every doctor's appointment. Doctors sometimes fail to carefully review a chart, so double checking about medicine safety can help your parent avoid dangerous reactions, especially if multiple physicians are involved.



Setting up medication alerts on your parent's phone or computer. A medication watch, that sounds an alarm when it's time to take a drug, can help if your parent doesn't like computers or have a smartphone. Also, consider utilizing a medication tracking app to manage prescriptions and timing.

Nutrition and Meal Planning

Age often comes with special dietary needs, such as a low sodium diet to lower blood pressure or reduced intake of saturated fats to address clogged arteries. Ask your parent's doctor what role lifestyle remedies can play in addressing chronic health issues. An appointment with a nutritionist can give you the information you need to ensure your parent eats well. If your parent is reluctant to embrace healthy eating, a nutritionist might be able to give a strong nudge toward better nutrition. Some strategies to help your parent eat well include:

- Working with your parent and a nutritionist to create a list of simple, healthy meals your parent can make alone—or that you can make if your parent lives with you.
- Signing your parent up for a meal delivery service.
- Helping your parent keep the refrigerator stocked with healthy snacks.
- Enrolling your parent in a cooking class. This opportunity for socialization can inspire your parent to cook better food and enjoy more meals at home.

Activity Levels

Your parent might no longer be invested in how they look in a bathing suit, but that doesn't mean it's time to give up on exercise. Ask your parent's doctor about any limitations on physical activity. For example, a parent with a history of heart attacks might need to avoid vigorous cardiovascular exercise. In most cases though, age should not limit your parent's physical activity. The more physical activity, in fact, the better. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offers the following guidelines⁴:

- At least 150 minutes per week of moderate intensity aerobic exercise, such as walking, or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic exercise, such as running. Aerobic exercise strengthens the heart, lowers blood pressure, and can help your parent maintain a healthy weight.
- Muscle-strengthening activities, such as calisthenics or weight-lifting, at least two days per week. These activities can prevent osteoporosis by strengthening muscles and bones, and may help with chronic pain.

Socialization: The Key to a Healthy Mind and Body

Eighteen percent of older adults live alone, and 43 percent say they feel lonely on a regular basis.⁵ Socialization isn't just fun, but it's vital to your parent's health. Some strategies to keep your parent engaged and connected no matter how old they are include:

- Enrolling your parent in an adult day care program if he or she is unable to be alone or is severely disabled.
- Giving your parent the gift of a weekly class or membership at a local senior center.
- Splitting socialization duties among family members. You might not be able to visit your parent every day or even every week. But if each friend or family member can commit to visits on a regular basis, your parent's time can be filled with nourishing conversation with loved ones.

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Safety

As your parent's physical abilities decline, so too will the ability to seek help in the event of an emergency. Driving can also be a concern, particularly if your parent's eyes aren't working as well as they once did or reaction times are slowing down. Also, with age, people may lose some of the "habits" that many of us take for granted, such as remembering to lock doors and even taking medication can be an issue, thereby impacting safe transportation.

Some simple strategies to support your parent's long-term safety include:



Set up remote management of the home's electrical system and locks.

If you can lock your parent's house for them at night, you won't have to worry about doors left unlocked.



Drive with your parent to explore whether driving is a safety concern.

Many state DMVs allow family members to notify them of people who can no longer safely drive. If your parent is concerned about the loss of independence that comes with the loss of a driver's license, consider teaching them how to use Uber or look into discounted senior transport services in your area.



Talk with your parent's doctor about safety concerns.

Develop a family checklist that addresses each concern. For example, you might make a "before bedtime" list that includes locking doors and checking the stove.

Advanced Care Considerations

As early as you can, discuss with your parent the family's plan for when he or she needs more help beyond what your family can provide. This conversation can be difficult to have, particularly if your parent is accustomed to an active and independent lifestyle. Reassuring your parent that you wish to honor his or her wishes and that you are only bringing it up to ensure his or her life is as good as possible can help. If your parent is reluctant, don't force the issue. Try again in a few weeks. During your conversation, some good questions to ask include:

- What sort of care do you hope to receive if you are no longer able to care for yourself? What are the things you worry most about? Boredom? Pain? Loneliness?
- What are your fears about aging, and what can we do to help you with those fears?
- Do you have specific wishes for care at the end of your life? Do you want to be resuscitated, or do you want to sign a "do not resuscitate"? At what point, if any, would you want to be taken off of life support?
- Do you have an updated will? If not, can we talk to a lawyer to ensure your will reflects your wishes?
- What sorts of things do you think will be comforting to you if you suffer from memory or speech issues?
- Who in the family would you like to make medical decisions on your behalf if you are no longer able to make them yourself?
- Is there anyone in the family whom you do not want to care for you?



Warning Signs to Look For

Aging doesn't happen overnight. However, a slow progression toward function and memory loss can actually obscure serious problems. Have you ever heard of the old science test with the frog and the boiling pot? If you place a frog in a boiling pot, he will jump right out. But if you slowly warm the water, he doesn't realize what's happening until it's too late.

It's human nature to catalogue "normalcy" as not requiring an immediate response so we can prioritize the things that need our attention right away. While urgent events, such as an accident or illness, may spring us into action, noticing smaller changes throughout the years often becomes harder. That being said, it's also possible to overestimate the extent to which your parent needs help if things seem different than how they've been in the past.

Going to a doctor's appointment with your parent every now and again is a simple, effective way to monitor your parent's health and capacity. The doctor can give you advice about the prognosis of any conditions with which your parent has been diagnosed. As your parent ages, you'll likely need to take a more proactive approach, both by seeing your parent more frequently and attending as many medical appointments as you can.

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Signs of Dementia

Physical disorders, such as Parkinson's, are difficult to conceal, particularly as they progress. Dementia, however, is more deceptive; it appears slowly, and some signs might seem like trivial mistakes anyone can make. Even advanced dementia is variable. A parent might seem fine one second and totally debilitated the next, thereby leading some caregivers to mistakenly believe the parent is exaggerating symptoms.

Some cognitive decline is normal, but this mild decline should not affect your parent's ability to function. If you notice more significant cognitive decline, talk to your parent and their doctor.





While your doctor should always be your final resource, some dementia warning signs to watch out for include:⁶



Memory loss that disrupts everyday life or even poses a danger. Forgetting a family member's name may be a warning sign, but regularly leaving the stove on could be dangerous for your parent and others.



Difficulties with planning or problem-solving. Occasional mathematical errors or forgetfulness are common; not being able to remember where a grandchild lives is not.



Confusion about time or place. A parent who does not know where they are, what year it is, or that their children are adults may have dementia.



Difficulties with visual cues or spatial relationships. A person with memory impairment may struggle to understand familiar signs or judge distance between vehicles while driving.



People who have been where you are now are excellent sources of insight.



Changes in speech. Occasionally forgetting a word or name is normal, but dramatic changes in speech output or in the inability to participate in conversation could warn of dementia.



Frequently losing things and being unable to develop strategies to find them. Everyone loses keys from time to time, but if a person cannot remember where they were, how to look for keys, or why they need their keys, this signals a need for help.



Poor judgment. Alzheimer's interferes with executive functioning. This can cause people to behave unusually or make bad decisions, such as giving large sums of money to an irresponsible family member or taking poor care of a grandchild.



Withdrawing from previously enjoyed activities. This can be due to cognitive changes or an attempt to conceal those changes.



Changes in mood or personality. Alzheimer's affects the entire brain, not just memory. So people with Alzheimer's and other dementias may display unusual behavior, such as impulse control difficulties, hostility, or even inappropriate sexual advances.



Detecting a Problem If You Don't Live with Your Parent

If your parent already lives with you, you'll probably notice subtle signs of decline that, over time, become harder to ignore. If you don't live with your parent, it may take longer to notice problematic changes. Some symptoms to look for include:

- **Unpaid bills:** Are there late notices piling up on the table? Has your parent's power been shut off?
- **Nutritional issues:** Is the refrigerator stocked with food? Are there signs, such as weight loss, that your parent isn't eating?
- **Medication:** Is your parent taking his or her medication, or are pill bottles full?
- **Hygiene:** Is your parent clean and generally well-tended? Age can somewhat compromise self-care. For example, a woman who once diligently applied makeup might have smeared mascara. But the more effectively your parent dresses and cares for himself or herself, the less likely it is that dementia is a serious concern.
- **Home maintenance:** Is the home generally well-maintained? Is the lawn cut? Does your parent still decorate for holidays?
- **Communication:** Does your parent still know how to use the phone, email, or other communication tools he or she previously used?
- **Driving:** Has your parent recently accumulated a large number of moving violations?
- **Daily activities:** Does your parent still show up for family plans, or is he or she often late or absent? Does your parent go to classes outside the home or socialize with friends? What about travel? Can your parent still competently travel on his or her own, or are there frequent mix-ups?

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Warning Signs to Look For

Most older adults don't go straight from their house to a nursing home. A parent might first just need a little more help from a child. And with so many options from independent living and assisted living to memory care and state-level programs, everyone's journey and right fit are a little different.

There's no specific criteria for each level of care. If you don't work outside the home and can afford in-home care, for example, your parent might not ever need to live in assisted living. Instead, the right care plan comes down to what works for your family. Ask yourself the following questions. If you answer affirmatively, it's probably time to seek additional help:

- Are your parent's medical and physical needs being met?
- Do you worry about your parent's safety?
- Do you feel overwhelmed and unable to tend to your parent's needs?
- Is your parent getting the socialization, exercise, and daily intellectual stimulation necessary to lead a happy life and age successfully?
- Does your parent's doctor seem concerned about his or her living situation?
- Has a parent who lives with you begun to pose a danger to your family?
- Are you chronically stressed by the needs of a parent who lives with you?



Assessing Your Options

Expanding your parent's care with professional support does not have to mean constraining his or her access to happiness and fulfillment. The right community or care strategy is one that maximizes independence while minimizing safety and medical concerns. Some of the many options at your disposal include:

- Assisted living or continuing care retirement communities, which allow your parent to receive several levels of care in apartment-based community settings. These also often have a range of amenities, such as wellness activities and opportunities to learn and engage.
- Independent living communities, which offer little or no care, but may provide dining and cleaning services. Your parent may also have regular opportunities for socialization and exercise.
- Nursing homes, which are regulated by the federal government and provide constant care in a medicalized setting.
- Memory care communities, which cater to the unique needs of people with dementia, usually in a setting similar to an assisted living community.
- Home care, which can include visiting nurses, live-in aides, or some combination of the two.
- Adult day care, which provides your parent a safe place to go while you work.
- Respite care, which offers you a short-term break from the demands of caregiving.
- Residential care homes, which offer care in a small, residential setting.

The sooner you begin the search, the easier it will be, especially because pressure to find support in an emergency can cloud your judgment. You may be surprised to learn how many positive, affordable options are out there.



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Resources:

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