

Taking Care!

Look for clues about parent's coping during holiday visits!

By Lisa M. Petsche – lmepetsche@gmail.com

Addressing the needs of aging parents is a big concern for many boomers and younger seniors. Determining whether mom or dad needs assistance managing day to day can be especially difficult when they don't live close by.

A holiday visit with a parent presents the perfect opportunity to assess firsthand how well they are coping on their own.

Plan to stay with them long enough so you aren't rushed. That way you'll have ample time not only to enjoy each other's company and special holiday activities, but also to get a good sense of how they are doing.



**Lisa
Petsche**

Read on for indicators that your parent needs assistance with activities of daily living or adaptations to their physical environment - or both.

- **Grooming:** Changes in appearance, such as unkempt hair; inappropriate dress or soiled clothing; body odor.
- **Nutrition:** Noticeable weight loss; insufficiently or inappropriately stocked refrigerator and pantry.
- **Housekeeping:** Accumulation of dirty dishes, laundry or garbage; excessive dirt or clutter.
- **Finances:** Unopened bills; major credit card debt or large, inexplicable bank account withdrawals; inability to count money or perform basic banking transactions.
- **Medication:** Non-compliance with medication regimes - look for prescriptions that haven't been filled and for unused medication; lack of an organized system for managing medications.
- **Mobility:** Difficulty going from sitting to standing; poor balance or walking endurance; difficulty negotiating stairs.
- **Safety:** Recent falls - look for bruises, limping or guarding of certain body parts; cluttered walkways or stairwells; accidents with household appliances.
- **Energy Level:** Lethargy or social withdrawal.
- **Mental Status:** Poor short-term memory; inability to carry out familiar routines or follow instructions; lack of insight into needs and limitations; suspiciousness.

Getting Help

- Here are some ways to help, depending on your parent's situation. Some may necessitate extending your stay or planning a follow-up visit.
- Arrange for a medical check-up and accompany your parent. Lethargy, forgetfulness or confusion might be caused by a reversible condition such as infection or depression. Request a medication review: side effects, drug interactions or overmedication might be the root of difficulties. Also ask their pharmacist about aids for organizing and remembering to take medications.
- If vision is a problem, ask your parent's doctor for a referral to an ophthalmologist. If nothing can be done to improve their vision, get them a magnifier for reading and other visually adaptive items, such as a large-keypad telephone.
- If falls are a concern, perform a home safety assessment to identify potential hazards and do what you can to rectify them. Visit a medical supply store for products that can make daily activities easier and safer.
- If financial management is an issue, arrange for direct deposit of pension checks and automatic bill payments. If necessary, have mail redirected to your home. Connect your parent with a lawyer about assigning durable power of attorney for property to one or two trusted individuals.
- Investigate available resources in the community. These might include: grocery delivery services; meals on wheels; volunteer driver programs; accessible transportation; therapeutic day programs; recreation programs; and home health care services. The local office on aging is a good resource.
- If the needs you identify aren't urgent, defer addressing them until after the holidays, so you don't spoil the festive mood. This also gives you an opportunity to consult with siblings and arrange a family meeting if necessary.
- If your parent is reluctant to consider assistance, start by trying to interest them in one of the least intrusive options, such as making minor home adaptations or using a grocery delivery service.
- Stress that your aim is to help them age in place and preserve the independence they so highly value.

Lisa M. Petsche is a social worker and freelance writer specializing in elder care.