

Advocating to Keep Our Older Parents Healthy & Happy

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For those of us who are fortunate to have one or both parents still living, we are faced with the reality of a role reversal in our relationship. Now it is us, the adult children, who are taking our parents to their doctor's appointments, managing their healthcare needs, caring for them or making the decision to move them into a facility.



Whatever the situation, it is natural to feel challenged and often intimidated in the role we have undertaken. But if you stay positive and proactive, you'll be in a great position to advocate for your parents' optimal care. And what a better way is there to say "Thank You" for all they have done for you over the years?

Following are six recommendations that may help you understand what may be happening to your parents as they age and what you can do to help:

Stay vigilant to sudden changes.

Typically, sudden changes arise from sudden problems. Your elderly parent who is confused one week but was alert and oriented the week before, or becomes unsteady walking and starts falling, is likely experiencing an acute problem such as an infection, medication side effect or perhaps a stroke. If you are attentive to your parent's baseline health and behavior, you will be alert to sudden and subtle fluctuations. Being attuned to what is "normal" for your parent is critical in advocating for them.

Keeping your parent's physician informed of changes will help to ensure that they receive a proper diagnosis and timely treatment, which is important in acute conditions.

Investigate the source of gradual decline.

A variety of conditions can cause a gradual decline. Before jumping to a conclusion that Alzheimer's disease is the culprit, recognize that different problem such as vitamin B12 deficiency, depression or Parkinson's disease, for example. When discussing your parent's decline with a physician, make sure the two of you consider all the possibilities. Prepare for the appointment in advance, making detailed notes how their decline has manifested itself, such as loss of appetite, failing short-term memory, etc. Keep note of how long you have noticed these changes.

Know Thy Parents medicine cabinet.

Familiarize yourself with the medications your parent takes: what each one is for and how often they are taken. Make sure you notify each doctor your parent visits of all the medications they take including over-the-counter medications. Ask what side effects you might observe from each medication and whether it's potentially dangerous if your parent takes them together. Physicians should also be informed whether your parent drinks alcohol, caffeinated drinks or smokes, as these substances can effect some medications' efficacy and safety.

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Following are six recommendations that may help you understand what may be happening to your parents as they age and what you can do to help:

1. Stay vigilant to sudden changes. Typically, sudden changes arise from sudden problems. Your elderly parent who is confused one week but was alert and oriented the week before, or becomes unsteady walking and starts falling, is likely experiencing an acute problem such as an infection, medication side effect, or perhaps a stroke. If you are attentive to your parent's baseline health and behavior, you will be alert to sudden and subtle fluctuations. Being attuned to what is "normal" for your parent is critical in advocating for them. Keeping your parent's physician informed of changes will help to ensure that they receive a proper diagnosis and timely treatment, which is important in acute conditions.

2. Investigate the source of gradual decline. A variety of conditions can cause a gradual decline. Before jumping to a conclusion, that Alzheimer's disease is the culprit, recognize that your parent may be experiencing an altogether different problem such as vitamin B12 deficiency, depression, or Parkinson's disease, for example. When discussing your parent's decline with a physician, make sure the two of you consider all the possibilities. Prepare for the appointment in advance, making detailed notes how their decline has manifested itself, such as loss of appetite, failing short-term memory, etc. Keep note of how long you have noticed these changes.

3. Know Thy Parents medicine cabinet. Familiarize yourself with the medications your parent takes: what each one is for and how often they are to be taken. Make sure you notify each doctor your parent visits of all the medications they take including over-the-counter medications. Ask what side effects you might observe from each medication and whether it's potentially dangerous if your parent takes them together. Physicians should also be informed whether your parent drinks alcohol, caffeinated drinks, or smokes, as these substances can effect some medications' efficacy and safety.

4. Discourage ageist attitudes. Ageism is prejudice against the elderly. It exists in many forms but can be particularly damaging to an older person's self-esteem when it assumes that all of their woes are age-related. Several examples of expressing ageism to an elderly parent might include: "You're not getting any younger" or "What do you expect at your age?" As difficult as it may be, try to remind yourself, you sell your parent short if you chalk up everything that ails them to their age.

5. Address not just symptoms, but emotions, too. There is disease and then there is "dis-ease" – that is, a lack of ease, security or well-being. "Dis-ease" can manifest itself as a myriad of emotions in an elderly person, such as fear, grief, boredom, embarrassment or sadness. The fact is these emotions can be every bit as debilitating as disease. For example, a parent who is incontinent may be too embarrassed to socialize, and cut themselves off from friends. Without companionship, the parent may become lonely. Discuss with the physician how to address the incontinence rather than allowing your parent to isolate themselves. Together, you can consider different solutions that will ease embarrassment and reinvigorate social life.

6. Strive to maximize your parent's quality of life. No matter what age we are, we all want to enjoy life to the fullest and have the capability to do the things we want to. As a parent gets older, their quality of life becomes more important than how much longer they live. A person does not necessarily need more medications or surgery to ensure that they are living the later part of their life to the fullest. Sometimes, it is the small gestures that have the most profound impact. Being there to solve a problem or provide companionship are worthwhile services you can provide, and no expertise is required. Improving the enjoyment of life and a parent's functional ability are cardinal goals of geriatric care. As the child of an elderly parent, you are uniquely positioned to deliver these life changing gifts.