

Summer visits: Things to think about

Ann O'Sullivan, OTR/L, LSW
Family Caregiver Specialist

Might there be a problem?

Summer in Maine is often a time when families who live far apart get to spend time together. At SMAA, we frequently receive phone calls from people who are visiting an older adult family member or friend, and are concerned about them.

There are many possible signs that a person may be having a problem in any of the following areas, including:

- Health (burns, injuries, falls, weakness, drug or alcohol use)
- Cognition (memory loss, confusion, paranoia, agitation, unusually loud or quiet behavior, difficulty with decision-making)
- Mental / emotional health (loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities, changed relationships, change in sleeping pattern)
- Self care (neglected personal hygiene, dirty clothes, body odor, bad breath, unkempt appearance)
- Nutrition (unintentional weight gain or loss, changes in eating habits, lack of appetite, food on hand is old or sparse)
- Home management (insufficient food, unopened mail, unsanitary conditions, accumulation of trash, papers)
- Money management (unpaid bills, bills paid twice, money or checks lost, questionable spending judgment)
- Driving (accidents, tickets, getting lost, others feel unsafe in car)

How do I know what the problem is?

When you spot a sign that something about your family member or friend has changed, it could be a symptom of any of a number of different things. Here are some possible alternative reasons for some basic problems. Discuss your concerns with the person (and others who sees them regularly) to determine what's behind what you're seeing, so you can consider possible solutions.

For instance, if you are visiting and notice there is no food in the refrigerator, it might indicate that the person is forgetting to eat, but might also indicate they lack transportation to the store, have no money for food, or have a medical condition that affects their appetite.

Perhaps you notice bruises or other signs of injury. Of course, it's important find out if the person is being abused, and to take immediate steps to help them be safe. Or perhaps they've fallen, due to physical weakness or imbalance, or medication effects. Possibly vision loss is affecting their ability to maneuver.

Maybe they need handrails, or an evaluation for a mobility device. Again, understanding the problem will make identifying options to solve it much clearer.

What if the older adult seems withdrawn and sleeps a lot more than you expect? Perhaps they're experiencing depression, or responding to the loss of a friend or family member, a move or other change. Perhaps they are taking a new medication that is affecting their alertness, either by itself or in combination with something else they're taking. Perhaps they're experiencing issues with their thyroid, anemia, or other health issues. These concerns can be brought to the attention of the person and their physician to determine and treat any underlying medical conditions.

If a person who has previously been attentive to their appearance starts to appear messy or unclean, there could be any number of reasons. While it might be assumed that they are experiencing cognitive loss (forgetting to wash), it could be that they are depressed (not caring to wash), fatigued (too tired to wash), or in pain (hurts to wash). Perhaps laundry facilities are inaccessible or they are out of detergent.

What can I do to help?

These are just examples of how one problem can appear to be another. Always ask questions and remember not to make assumptions too quickly. If you are concerned that an older family member or friend may need additional support, discuss it with them, other involved people, and their doctor, if you can. A visit can be a good time to schedule a family meeting or physician appointment together, to build communication and collaborate on concerns.

It is important to keep in mind that competent adults of any age have the right to make their own decisions, whether or not other people agree with their choices. It is also important to know that there are many resources in the community that may be able to help solve underlying problems, contributing to a good quality of life for the older adult and family members. Southern Maine Agency on Aging can help steer you in the right direction. Please feel free to call us and we'll try to help you connect with what you need.