

9 Warning Signs Your Elderly Parent Shouldn't Be Living Alone Anymore

Raising the subject of moving to a residential care facility can be a hard conversation to have with aging parents, but sometimes, it's the only way to keep them safe and healthy. These are the signs that suggest it's time.

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They've suddenly lost a bunch of weight



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If you notice your parent is looking thinner than usual, it may be a sign that they're not eating well, which could be a sign of the beginning of a cognitive illness. Lisa Gwyther, director of Duke University's Family Support Program, explains that people suffering from a memory impairment, such as Alzheimer's, often either forget to eat certain meals or forget how to properly manage and cook their food, causing them to lose weight. If this is the case, you might want to discuss the possibility of moving your loved one into an assisted living facility, where you can feel confident that they will receive all of their nutrients each day. Here are the early signs of Alzheimer's to watch for.

Their home is stacked with unopened mail



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Towering heaps of unopened mail can be another clear indication of growing cognitive impairment. Gwyther says to keep a close eye out for unopened envelopes from creditors or charities your parents wouldn't normally donate to. This can be a red flag that they've lost control of their judgment when it comes to smart spending, which can drive them into debt rapidly if it

goes unnoticed.

They're ignoring their personal hygiene



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For someone with dementia or Alzheimer's, remembering all of the cognitive steps involved with taking a shower every day isn't always the no-brainer you believe it to be. It may be difficult for them to understand why they need to take a shower and how to do it, leaving them with an unhealthy hygiene routine. "You can tell them that it looks like they need a shower, but they just don't see it," Gwyther says. That said, not all grooming practices are essential—here's what you can let go.

They get lost when going to familiar places



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Common destinations like the grocery store, the bank, or their church should be routine routes for your parent. If you find they can no longer find their way to these destinations, it's a big red flag that something is wrong. Gwyther explains that if you can no longer trust your loved one's ability to navigate their own town, it might be time to discuss moving into an assisted living facility for safety's sake. These are the memory problems that have nothing to do with Alzheimer's.

You notice changes in their home





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A cluttered house isn't necessarily a bad sign if your parent was always a bit messy, explains Peter Lichtenberg, PhD, director of the Institute of Gerontology and Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute. However, if they suddenly begin letting order slide after a lifetime of cleanliness, it might be a sign of an underlying cognitive issue. Additionally, watch out for items showing up in strange places around the home, like a gallon of milk in the dishwasher instead of the refrigerator. According to Dr. Lichtenberg, changes like these are often some of the clearest signs of dementia, and they could be a clue that your loved one is no longer in a position where it's safe to be home alone. Watch out these other early signs of memory loss.

Their Internet habits have shifted



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For those with Internet-savvy parents, be on the lookout for any strange or unusual new online habits, as this could signal dementia or another similar illness. "People who are cognitively declining are at a real risk of ordering things they don't need, taking on debt, and facing identity theft," Gwyther says. "Even if they had been on the Internet and had been perfectly fine before, families need to be looking out for that." You should also take a look at their Facebook or other social media accounts from time to time to make sure they aren't accidentally befriending people who could be potentially dangerous. Gwyther explains that this is a common issue for people with cognitive disorders, as it's hard for them to tell who's a friend and who's a foe. Here's what people with Alzheimer's wish you knew.

They're always exhausted



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Dementia, Alzheimer's, and other chronic conditions can be extremely exhausting, keeping your loved one up all night and drowsy all day. As Gwyther explains, sleep is absolutely vital for both cognitive and physical functioning, and missing out on much-needed z's can make your parent's condition even more serious. If it seems like your parent's lack of sleep is putting a significant crimp in their well-being, you may consider talking about an assisted living facility. If a cognitive impairment isn't to blame, this might be why your parent is tired all the time.

They have a strange collection of new medications



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If your parent's medicine cabinet is suddenly filled with unusual or possibly unnecessary medications, a cognitive impairment could be the explanation. Gwyther explains that many patients with diseases like dementia or Alzheimer's often accidentally misuse over-the-counter medications, as they're trying to treat something that isn't really there. She also says to make sure your parent is taking the medications they *do* need, and that they're taking them at the appropriate times. If month-old bottles of their daily medication are sitting around completely full, it might be because they no longer can remember to take them. Don't miss this breakthrough that could reverse Alzheimer's.

They're defensive



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As extreme as it might seem, Gwyther says there have been many instances of aging people in cognitive decline purchasing guns to keep in their home for protection, even if they never owned a gun previously. With a disease like dementia, people often become suspicious of those around them—including family—as they can't distinguish who's trying to help and who's trying to hurt them. Having a gun in the house (or mace, or even a hammer by the door) can be incredibly dangerous for

someone who's cognitively impaired, so flag it as a huge sign that they should no longer be living alone. Stop believing these myths about Alzheimer's disease.

How do you start the conversation?



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Bringing up the possibility of moving your parent into a nursing home or assisted living facility can be very difficult. Dr. Lichtenberg says to approach the topic delicately by asking your parent how they're feeling and what their goals are, and asking whether or not they've noticed any changes in their behavior. From there, you can introduce the idea of getting help, explaining that it's a smart first step to achieving those goals. People with declining cognition often can't understand that something is wrong, so it's important to take it slow and account for their perspective. Take the time to get educated about the three most common forms of dementia, so you can attempt to understand what your parent is going through.