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Recognizing when your parents need help

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Sometimes it's obvious when older parents need outside help—like when they're having difficulty managing numerous chronic illnesses or losing mobility and unable to maneuver well even at home. But mental

problems may not be as easy to spot.

For instance, is Dad's forgetfulness—his misplacing house keys or missing appointments—normal aging or a sign of something more serious, such as dementia?

It can be hard to judge the severity of problems if you live far away and speak infrequently. But even if you live close by, you might not realize the cumulative effects of gradual changes.

Maybe it's time to visit your parents and look for clues. Be aware of these specific warning signs and what they could signal:

- Food that's rotting in the refrigerator or an empty fridge are signs of not eating properly.
- Dirty clothes and linens can signal they're neglecting their personal hygiene.
- Piles of unopened mail including "past due" bills could indicate that they're no longer able to handle finances.
- Conversation difficulties, from repeating the same story or asking the same question over and over, can be signs of memory loss.

Next steps include accompanying your parent to a doctor's appointment so that you can bring up these issues. You can also ask about cognitive (or mental) assessment tests, suggest experts at the Family Caregiver Alliance. One test, called SAGE, is self-administered and can be done online.

Based on test results, a long-range strategy might include helping Mom or Dad with paying bills, food shopping and tending to their personal care. These tasks can be done by you or a trusted caregiver.

More information: The U.S. National Institute on Aging has more on tests that assess impairment.

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