

Living Independently & Safely How can you tell?

Recognizing the signs of safety concerns of our parents and loved ones can be a difficult task. As someone close to them it may be difficult to remain objective. How do we measure safety?

There are many factors to consider that might indicate a need to be concerned. Key factors in deterring a safe degree of independence may include looking for changes in the following areas:

Personal Care – Is their personal hygiene and cleanliness appropriate? Are their clothes clean, worn correctly? Is their appearance consistent with how they were manicured in the past? Do their clothes fit properly?

Environment – Are they able to maintain the cleanliness of the home or are they overwhelmed by basic housekeeping responsibilities? Are there signs that they have adapted household objects support or do you observe them moving around their home by holding onto furniture? Are throw rugs disheveled?

Meal Preparation – Do they appear to be eating properly? Do they have a safe way of obtaining their groceries? Is food properly stored? Does the refrigerator contain spoiled food?

Medication Management – Are they able to competently manage their medication. Are they taking it properly, can they manage refills or do they need outside assistance. Do they use a pill box?

Transportation – Do they continue to drive? Are you comfortable with that decision and do you feel they exhibit sound judgment when it comes to the use of the car such as distance, time of day, weather conditions. Have they experienced any episodes of getting lost or took longer than expected to reach a destination?

Isolation – Are your loved ones able to stay active with family, friends, and social events or do they tend to remain home with little outside stimulation.

These are just a few of the indicators to be aware of when there is concern with the safety & independence of a parent or loved one. Most importantly changes or concern in any of these areas may not warrant immediate change in their

living environment but it may create an awareness that the parent may need additional support from outside resources to assist them in adjusting to any physical and cognitive changes that are apt to occur as one ages. Many services are now available to help elders & their families feel comfortable with the decision to continue to live independently. Services include home care agencies, volunteer groups, pharmacy assistance, local transportation services, and geriatric care managers. The role of the geriatric care manager can be to assist the elder and their family with determining the necessary resources, coordinate the chosen care to be provided. An important aspect to all this change is including in professional from outside the family unit who can remain objective and help in preventing blame being placed on the family member who pursues the necessary changes.

Worrying about our parents and family members who are aging in their homes can create stress in our lives. Discussing the need for change with our parents can be a difficult and often uncomfortable task. Working with them to remain safe and independent can help you both achieve the common goal of safe independence.

Laurie Ray, MSW, CMSW