

Assessing Elder Needs

How Much Help Does Your Parent Need?

One of the most difficult, but most critical, tasks for an elder or family member who is seeking care or housing is to assess how much help the older person really needs. If too little support is provided elders may not receive what is necessary to remain safe and healthy. If families insist on giving more care than the elder needs or wants, the elder may begin to consider themselves to be incompetent and their ability to function may deteriorate faster than it would otherwise.

In general, the right level of care is that which ensures that basic needs are met but which allows the maximum amount of independence and dignity. It must also be the care that the elder desires. Unless someone has been determined to be incompetent by a judge, he or she has the legal right to make decisions about care. This includes the right to refuse care even if family members or others sincerely believe it is necessary. A survey conducted by Brandeis University of 1,000 elders showed that many elders in adult day care or assisted living were placed there against their wishes by their children.

On the other hand, families and elders frequently underestimate needs. The transition from independent, authoritative adult to frail elder requiring support can be traumatic for both the older person and their family. Unfortunately, services can be quite costly and “sticker shock” can also be a barrier to ensuring that elders receive what they need. When considering the cost, however, it is worth thinking about the increased cost of care should a preventable accident, injury, or medical crisis occur that leads to long term or even permanent residence in a nursing home.

The first step to ensuring a balance between safety and independence is to realistically evaluate what care is really needed. Some questions to ask are:

* Which daily needs can you or your relative meet and which will require assistance? Think about: personal care such as toileting and bathing, preparing meals, shopping, cleaning and laundry, lawn and home maintenance, opportunities to be with others, transportation to medical appointments, and ability to manage finances. You might want to put these into categories of “definitely needed now,” “needed sometimes,” “will be needed in the near future,” and “not needed” and then make a plan that puts into place support for those things that are needed all the time first. When that is done, make contacts so that the elder can access those that are needed sometimes as necessary or will be needed in the future. You will also want to consider why support is needed in various areas: Is there a cognitive problem that might respond to medical treatment? Is a mobility impairment the main problem? Is lack of transportation the major impediment to independence? Once you have considered the root cause of the need for support, you may be able to solve the problem without adding in-home or other services.

* What makes life worth living for you or your older relative? As you make decisions for you or with your family member, consider the advantages or disadvantages of each option and decide what will make life the most fulfilling or enjoyable. You may wish to rate the following from “very important” to “not important at all” when considering a plan, remembering that you will need to give up some of these in order to gain others: safety, security, independence, convenience, being near family, being near friends and

organizations to which you or your family member belong, having people in the home to talk to, privacy, and cost.

* What would happen in an emergency? If a home care worker was not able to come for some reason could a family member step in on an hour's notice or would the elder go without toileting or food? If falling is a concern, would someone find the elder quickly or might they lay on the floor for days? What other emergencies might occur and what needs to be in place to ensure the elder's safety should they happen?

* What options exist besides employing in-home care? The nation is experiencing a crisis shortage of in-home care workers and so you may not be able to find someone to provide services. Can the home be adapted? Can an emergency response system be put in place? What could you or the elder be taught to do independently? Once a number of services are required, it makes sense to consider assisted living where these services can be most conveniently provided.

While needs constantly change, the plan should be designed to be in place for as long a period as possible. Moving from independent living to assisted living to a nursing facility in a short amount of time or constant changes in in-home workers or services can be very disorienting and traumatic to someone who is frail. It is not unusual for someone who has a changed environment to lose functional ability for some weeks before regaining the level they had before the move.

Before making a plan, get information about all the options available. Over the past decade, a number of new services have been developed to meet the increasing number of elders who need help. When inquiring, find out what is available near where you or the elder lives, what it costs and whether it is covered by insurance, and who you can contact to change the plan as necessary.

Elders or family caregivers who are considering the need for more support are welcome to call the Bedford Council on Aging for assistance. Our Elder Services Coordinator, Wendy Aronson, assists hundreds of families each year in assessing needs, referring for services, and providing ongoing support and advice. We also have information on available options, including brochures from over 200 assisted living and nursing facilities in our area. We can help those who are older and live in Bedford as well as residents who are caregivers of those who live elsewhere. Ms. Aronson can be reached at 781-275-6825.

The Minuteman Senior Services Information and Referral Unit, at 781-272-7177, also provides information on services and housing options. Those with elders living out-of-state, or elders considering moving, may call the Eldercare Locator of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging at 1-800-677-1116 to find an area agency on aging anywhere in the nation.