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Home for the Holidays: How to Check on Older Parents

There's no place like home for the holidays, but the truth is that those brief home visits can become stressful if you are dealing with older parents who are declining quickly. We see a surge in phone calls the day after Thanksgiving and after Christmas from adult children who want help with downsizing or moving their older parents into assisted living.

You can preemptively combat this stress by preparing a list of items to check up on during your home visit, even if it's just for a few days. I find that going in with a plan does a couple things:

1. First, it arms you with a sense of control and confidence. This way, you (and your siblings) are less likely to be blindsided, and your parents are less likely to be alarmed or upset by *your* shock at the state of things.
2. Second, it gives you the foresight to take advantage of time together to introduce the idea of downsizing or moving to assisted living if you think it may be necessary.

Here are the three areas to check if you are dealing with older parents during the holidays.

◆ Download our [Home for the Holidays Checklist](#)

Home Maintenance

I've noticed that the biggest safety threat that often goes overlooked by those dealing with older parents is deferred maintenance on an aging house. Because so many seniors prefer to age in place, they're often living in houses that are 40, 50, 60 years old or older. The last time your parents did a full maintenance check may have been before Dad's knee replacement, when he could still climb a ladder.

Make an initial sweep around the house while everyone is busy waiting for spiral ham and mashed potatoes. Check the air filters, light bulbs, locks on all windows and doors, faucets, and HVAC. Peer up the chimney, check for loose boards on stairs or the porch, and make sure there are non-slip mats in the bathrooms.

Assess the amount of extra stuff in the house: Are there piles of newspapers that could cause a fall or be a potential fire hazard? Make a note of everything you see, including the room where the problem is located. If the issues are overwhelming, help your parents make an appointment for a house inspection. Check their vehicles, too—make sure the starter turns over, the brakes work, and there aren't any service lights on in the dash.

If you live in a snowy area, line up someone to shovel and salt the walk and driveway when the weather hits. Neighbors can be great resources—bring them a plate of holiday cookies and I guarantee they'll be more than happy to help out and keep you updated. Local aging senior services are also a great resource for dealing with older parents on a more scheduled basis.

Documents and Finances

Many of us grew up with our parents saying their finances weren't any of our business, but if you're a potential executor of their estate, their caregiver, or both, then it *is* your business. This can be a difficult conversation to broach, but it's important to understand your parents' financial situation in case an unexpected emergency arises.

Be tactful in your approach—ask how their new wealth manager is working out or if they or any of their friends are talking about a reverse mortgage.

Find out where financial and health-related documents are stored. If your parents are meticulous record keepers and there's a well-used filing cabinet in the spare bedroom, you can probably let this one go. If you're not sure, ask. Emphasize that if one of them is struck by an unexpected medical emergency, you'll need to know where their health insurance documentation and medical records are kept, plus any deeds or titles in case the situation escalates to downsizing or a move to assisted living.

Health and Medications

Barring any medical complications that are obvious upon arrival, the three most important health issues are:

- nutrition,
- medications, and
- memory.

Nutrition

Open the fridge and the pantry and do a cursory scan for fresh fruit, vegetables, and protein. If all you see are canned goods, chips, and cookies, look into applying for Meals on Wheels. Volunteers bring home-cooked meals right to your parents' front door, and they cater to over 14 special diets. Don't stress too much over the ever-present sweets, though; if your 92-year old dad wants to eat a pint of Neapolitan ice cream every day, let him. He's earned that right.

Medications

Dealing with older parents who take multiple medications means checking to make sure the meds are organized and don't conflict with each other. Read the bottles: are they all prescribed by the same doctor? If not, write down the names of the medications and ask your own pharmacist about them later. If you're concerned about your parents' memory, consider picking up a couple of days-of-the-week pill containers and filling them yourself. Add extra labels, like name, month, and dates, to ensure it's clear who should take what when.

Memory

If you don't see your parents often, it can be difficult to pick up on any potential memory or cognitive issues in the span of a few days. This is where the neighbors come in handy again. If they see your parents often, ask if they've noticed any odd behavior from Mom, like repeating stories or forgetting regular events. If there's a possibility that she's showing signs of dementia, make a doctor's appointment as soon as possible, and make plans to go with her. Many causes of dementia, like medication side effects or kidney problems, can be remedied if caught early.

Finally, a key part of checking on older parents is to simply ask them how they're doing and if they need or want anything. At a time when they may start feeling a loss of control, giving them the opportunity to voice their *own* concerns may help

balance out the changes older parents must make to ensure their continued safety and security. Ask if there is anything you can take to Goodwill or the dump. If they are feeling bored, find fun classes or events that accommodate seniors. And don't forget to bake in some time to just enjoy each other's company while you're in town—it's the best way to show them you care, and it's guaranteed to be good for your mental well-being, too.

At **WayForth** we work with families in transition due to events such as downsizing, moving to assisted living or the death of a loved one. We can empty an entire house within days, sorting what items to keep, sell, donate, and discard. Our goal is to minimize a family's stress while maximizing the value of the estate. Call us for a free consultation 1-866-616-9708.

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