When it becomes time to take care of Mom or Dad

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It all began when your mother started forgetting where she put her car keys. But how were you to recognize an issue when you, as a busy mother, wife and full-time worker, misplaced your keys all the time too? And there was that time when your mother left her stove on after cooking Sunday's family meal. No big deal, right? She must have thought you turned it off. All the small signs of your mother declining really went unnoticed, until she fell and broke her arm.

In the United States, the likelihood of developing Alzheimer's dementia doubles every five years after the age of 65. After age 85, the risk rises to 50% of all seniors. It's common today to be in your 40s and 50s and taking care of an elderly parent, or two. Sometimes, a parent's home is thousands of miles away. But even with distance, listening to your parent(s) plays a vital role in understanding their health needs. Let's begin with signs of dementia.

There are several observations that can demonstrate signs of memory loss in seniors.

- Increased phone calls asking the same questions
- Difficulty balancing the checkbook or paying bills
- Getting lost when driving
- Leaving the stove burners on
- Food left out or stored improperly
- Inappropriate dress (ex: wearing three sets of underwear)
- Withdrawing socially (a very early sign that happens about two years prior to a diagnosis)
- Change in emotion such as easy-going to short-tempered
- Sexually inappropriate

If you recognize one or more of these indications of decline, it's important to start having conversations with your parent(s). I discuss this process in further detail later in the article.

Another lesser-known, yet significant, factor in elderly decline is Post Hospital Syndrome from recurrent hospitalizations and Emergency Department visits. For every day in the hospital, it takes four days to recover. Imagine what spending a week or more in the hospital could do to his or her psyche. These signs point out cues from this syndrome that could indicate a problem.

- Loss of one or more activities of daily living (toileting, bathing, transferring from bed to chair, and grooming)
- Falls accompanied by loss of mobility
- Weight loss
- Insomnia

If you recognize signs of memory loss or Post Hospital Syndrome, evaluate if the person in question can stay at home with a friend or relative or do they need to go to an assisted living facility. Sometimes a nursing home may be needed for their security or a skilled nursing home may be a better fit for rehabilitation services especially if they are coming out of a hospitalization experience. Unfortunately, changes in environment can be detrimental to these same patients. Stable environments increase their comfort level and make it easier for them to adapt to a daily routine.

Another factor that could result in long-term issues with the elderly is multiple medications. This means a combination of 10 or more prescriptions, over-the-counter and herbs combined. The combination of certain drugs could make them unstable by creating dizziness which may promote falls; loss of appetite; confusion and more. Many times people think that vitamins and herbs are harmless and don't talk to their provider and pharmacist about them. However, when taken with other medications, there could be adverse reactions. When making doctor appointments for an elderly person, please make sure to bring all prescription and over-the-counter medications for evaluation.

Before there's a crisis!
It's important to have discussions with your parents before there's a crisis. It's extremely stressful making decisions for a loved one when you're not entirely sure of their wishes. Have a sit down with the whole family and think about what they want for themselves. Some items to consider:

- Identify who has the medical power of attorney (multiple can be disastrous).
- What are the goals?
- Discuss ways that transitions can be made gentler.
- Complete Advanced Directives.
- Know the alternative home options: Assisted Living, Independent Living and Skilled Facility. Visit them with your parent(s) so if it relieves fear.
- Discuss after death considerations.

Taking the time to answer these challenging questions prior to an incident provides clear-headed discussions and heartfelt decisions. Being prepared will relieve the stress of both caregiver and the elderly who are transitioning into a new period of change. Both sides greeting this transition as just another stepping stone of life will make it easier and more enjoyable for everyone.

In the next issue of 406Women, we will discuss ways for caregivers to function in their new role and how to avoid burnout.