

# Clues for Deciding How and When to STEP IN

One of the most difficult things for caregivers and potential caregivers of elderly people is deciding when and how to help. Since most people greatly value their independence, elders may resent relatives stepping in to help them—even when the relatives have the best of intentions. And relatives often do not know exactly when is the right time, since the decline in an elderly person's abilities is gradual and almost imperceptible.

Here are some suggestions for how and when to step in to help an elderly relative:

## Communicate

It may seem obvious, but ask your elderly relative how they are doing. Although you may be hesitant to ask—fearing that he or she will deny any problems or become defensive—you might be surprised at your relative's honesty. Ask how he or she is coping with everyday chores. Ask whether he or she is encountering any difficulties eating, driving, walking, cleaning. Ask if he or she is experiencing any depression, anxiety or other emotional problems. And when you ask these questions, listen carefully to the answers. Don't assume that you know what that person is going to say—that's why you've had to ask! This kind of communication is vital to beginning the caregiving process.

## Observe the Signs

With some elders, however, normal communication is out of the question. They may, in fact, be too defensive to discuss their problems. Or they may be suffering from Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia that is affecting their memory or preventing useful conversation. In these cases, you'll need to rely on your own and others observations.

- Is your elder getting thin?
- Seeming pale and weak?
- Getting into car accidents?
- Suffering from falls?
- Unable to remember doctor's appointments?

All of these could be signs that your elder needs some degree of help, and you'll know that it's time to step in.

## Start Gradually

Sometimes the best way to begin helping is gradually. You might not want to wait to step in until there's an emergency or a crisis; in fact, you might be able to help more if you step in when your elder only needs occasional help. Go over and visit, wash the windows, fix a Sunday dinner. This way, you can begin to keep an eye on him or her, build trust and be able to observe when more extensive or daily help is needed.

