

How much support does your loved one need?

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Guest Columnist

Check the 5 A's

As you reflect on the holidays and enter a new year with memories of family gatherings, you may have noticed changes in your loved one's cognitive abilities. You have a gut feeling that something is "off." Is it your imagination? Do you chalk it up to aging?

How should I deal with this? Should I deal with this?

The first suggestion is to visit your loved one more frequently to see what is actually going on. Are they safe? Can they make informed decisions to handle their activities of daily living? How is their hygiene? This is a huge red flag. Are they eating well? Are they steady on their feet? Can they find their way around?

To help you in your assessment, consider any or all of the five A's associated with most memory impairment.

Amnesia

Do they remember that they saw you yesterday? Do they remember where they saw you? Do they remember your name? What do they recall short term? Long term?

Apraxia

What is their relationship with their environment? What is their spatial awareness? How are they walking and navigating their environment? As people progress in their disease, they have difficulty navigating space and become unsteady in their gait. In many instances, they can no longer see in three dimensions. Floors and rugs that have contrasting colors may be especially challenging.

Agnosia

Do they know what an item is and what is its function? Do they know what the "key" is for, for example? Do they know what it is called and what it does? Can they use the "key"?

Do they eat with the proper utensils?

Aphasia

How is their ability to access language? Do they have difficulty verbally communicating? Are they

saying things that don't make sense to you but seem to make sense to them? Is their dialogue becoming a "word salad?" Note that if they speak in word salad, they hear in word salad as well. That may be why it may be difficult for them to follow your conversation.

Anomia

Are they unable to access words? They may substitute words for those they cannot recall. They may replace one noun or verb for another.

The A's do not come all at once. The A's develop gradually over time. The A's don't affect everyone, but they are visible in most who have a form of dementia.

How do you know it is time to place a loved one in Memory Care?

It is different for everyone. Your loved one may become incontinent or wander aimlessly. They may forget who their family is or may become aggressive. Each person's tipping point is different. The time will come when you realize that you are not equipped to provide the care they need. You will realize your quality of life is suffering. If you are honest with yourself, you will recognize the tipping point for you. You must act on it.

Why would you consider a Memory Care Community over a Home Health Aide? Isn't it better if your loved one stays in their home?

Initially staying home with help may be the best way to go. There will come a time when "home" is not the place they "live" anymore. The space becomes unfamiliar and the treasured objects will have lost their magic.

Those who work in memory care understand that "Home" is not a place, but a feeling of safety and familiarity. Home is being in a community that is accepting, compassionate, joyful and kind. Home is a community where we are celebrated and accepted for the imperfect person we are.

Staying isolated with one or two caregivers cannot provide what is needed for a dignified life.



What does a Memory Care Community Provide?

When the person becomes more compromised with any one or more of the A's, they may need to go to a memory care community. It is in the community where they can sustain a healthy baseline. The professionals there help your loved one maintain the independence they still have and care for them with appropriate distance and compassion.

A memory care community provides trained professionals to give your loved one the care and dignity they deserve in a supportive social environment. An excellent community will look at your loved one's strengths, not their limitations, and work with their strengths. Your loved one will be guided through their journey, developing a sense of purpose in their new normal.

Their day will be gently structured with times to be active, creative, thoughtful and restful. Body, mind and spirit are focused upon. Nutritious meals, lectures, social events, exercise and spiritual services, along with medical supervision enhance health and well being.

As a caregiver, you will find peace of mind in knowing that your loved one is safe. This allows you to visit and enjoy their company in their new normal.

You are facing difficult decisions. You don't need to do it on your own. Senior advisors and geriatric care managers are resources to help you decide. I suggest you find someone within the community. They will help you find the best fit for you and your loved one.