

## Parenting Your Parents

Published in *The Lakeville Journal*

June 24, 2010

Living Well

A column from SVNA by Cyd Emmons

Now that the Baby Boomers are aging into Senior Boomer status with their children finally launched, many suddenly find that their own parents need their attention.

While many older seniors remain vigorous and more than capable of leading independent lives, time inevitably takes its toll. Adult children or other younger relatives eventually have to more actively participate in their parents' lives, assuming more and more responsibility and decision-making until, though the change may be subtle, the roles of parent and child reverse.

"Parenting one's own parents is difficult for both parties involved," said Pauline Miller, MSW, LCSW, of the Salisbury Visiting Nurse Association. "It can involve anything from helping out with household tasks and errands to taking charge of their parents' health care and legal and financial affairs."

Often, adult children are the last ones to recognize that their parents can no longer cope on their own. It's very hard to come to grips with the fact that your parents, always such pillars of strength and support, can no longer look after themselves without help.

The signs may be there, but often children simply don't recognize them. For their part, aging parents either may be making strenuous efforts to mask their failing abilities or simply may not realize that they're no longer capable of shouldering the whole burden alone.

### Keep A Close Eye

"Adult children need to keep a close eye on their parents in assessing what assistance they may need. There are key indicators that something in your parents' lives may need your attention," Miller said.

- **Unsafe living environment:** "Is it safe for you parent to be using a stove?" Miller asked. "I can't tell you how many people try to heat up soup in a plastic margarine container on a stove burner."

Additionally, remove throw rugs or clutter that can cause a fall. Make sure the lighting is adequate. If possible, re-arrange the house so that your parents can live on one level to avoid stairs. Make sure your parent can see well enough to read instructions on medication.

- **Weight Loss:** This can be due to not having the energy for shopping and cooking; a loss of the sense of taste or smell; dietary restrictions, such as limiting salt, which may decrease palatability and interest in eating; or a medical condition. Tragically, it can even be insufficient funds to pay for both medications and food. "Whatever the reason," Miller said, "it should be addressed, starting with a medical check-up."

- **Poor Personal Care:** Are your parents' paying attention to their appearance and personal cleanliness? Are the house and yard well maintained? Do they seem to be in good spirits? "This a key point in assessing their mental health," Miller said.

- **Difficulty Navigating:** If your parents are having difficulty getting around the house, a cane or walker may help them. A higher toilet seat and grab bars installed in the bathroom can help prevent a fall.

### **The Open Road**

While we're on the general topic of navigation, it's important to take a long, hard look at your parents' driving abilities. Is your parent still a competent driver or a danger behind the wheel?

This is an extremely touchy issue, and understandably so. "Giving up driving is the final surrender of independence in our society, and chances are your parents are not going to handle it well at first," Miller said.

Go on short trips with your parent to get an idea of how well he or she handles the car. Maybe you can suggest limiting driving to local trips in familiar territory and only in daylight and good weather. If your parent is really a danger, you have to take decisive action. Just remember to be gentle about it and remain calm if your parent reacts angrily. This may be among the hardest things you'll ever have to do.

### **Many Senior Services**

"One thing you can do to help your parent is to familiarize yourself with the many services that are available to seniors," Miller said. "There are senior nutrition sites that offer companionship and activities as well as healthful meals. There are transportation services that take seniors to medical appointments or shopping for free or for a small donation, and agencies that provide low-cost help around the house and garden."

If it's clear that your parent has to have a caregiver, a range of home care services are available, from paid companions to someone to cook and help with personal care to skilled nursing. If remaining at home is no longer an option, you might tactfully suggest that it's time to consider a retirement community or nursing home.

Even if your parent doesn't respond to the help you offer as you might like, stay strong. Once they're comfortable and secure at home or in a retirement community, they'll be grateful and proud that they raised such good kids.