

HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHEN TO CALL IN A PROFESSIONAL?

by Hanni Epp, MA

Martha called last week with a confused tone to her voice: “I visited Mom and Dad over the weekend, and noticed that Dad had gotten more frail again. He has been getting around OK with the help of a walker, but it’s been hard for him to get into a bathtub. Mom helps as much as she can, but it’s all she can do to keep the medications straight. They’ve had meals brought in for the last year, and that’s great, but I think it’s time for a lot more services than that. Mom and Dad feel they are doing OK, and are kind of resistant to my suggestions. What should I do?”

About Martha. . .

Martha is in her mid-50s, teaching a few classes at the local university and working as a consultant in the alternative healing arts. Her parents live in another state, about 5 hours away. Martha is their only child, and she visits at least once a month to keep up their close connection, and to help in any way she can. Martha has been uneasy about her parents’ ability to care for themselves – but she hasn’t wanted to interfere or hurt their feelings. When signs of poor personal hygiene combined with piles of laundry in a disorderly house greeted her on this visit, Martha felt it was time for change. She wants some information on when is the right time to bring in professional help. Martha wants to help her parents; she just doesn’t know how.

What Are the Issues?

To start with, Martha is facing the challenge of being a long-distance caregiver. Because she is not there every day, she notices the differences in her

parents' health and ability to function when she visits. She worries that her parents may fall, or become ill because they are not taking care of themselves as well as in the past.

Her parents, on the other hand, have become accustomed to their present state. They may not like it, and wish their ability to care for themselves were better, but they are not ready to admit that they need outside help. It's frightening to think of bringing "strangers" in to their home, and they are worried that they won't have enough money to pay for help. What about "later" when they might *really* need help? Martha's parents may also be feeling some shame and embarrassment at losing their independent lifestyle and abilities, and so are resistant to asking for, and receiving help.

Rushing in to take control could be a disaster for both Martha and her parents. It is important to maintain their independence and dignity, just as she must balance her own work and family situations with giving care to her parents.

First Steps

- Martha might begin by determining if the situation is a risk to her parents' health or safety. If yes, then it is important for Martha to quickly begin the process of getting professional help. A call to her parents' physician would be a good place to start. Together they can assess the needs and build a care plan.
- If health and safety are not in immediate danger, Martha might use a daily tasks appraisal checklist to assess her parents' current status. Such a

checklist can be found on the website www.caregiverpa.psu.edu, or in numerous caregiver books, including And Thou Shalt Honor: The Caregiver's Companion, published by Rodale in 2002, edited by Beth Witrogen McLeod. Martha should be discreet so that her parents don't feel she is spying. It would be helpful to repeat this appraisal every few months, dating each copy, so as to track any decline in function. Others who visit regularly might also be asked to make observations over time. Their notes might lend support to Martha's care discussions with her parents.

- In addition, Martha might want to keep a watchful eye for the following red flags:
 - Appreciable weight loss or gain
 - Sudden paranoia, combativeness, aggression, or hallucinations
 - Disturbing changes in attitude and self-esteem
 - A noticeable decline in hygiene and grooming
 - Excuses for skipping routine tasks like going to the doctor, the barber or the grocery store
 - Lack of interest in friends, hobbies and activities
 - Social isolation
 - Unpaid bills, or notices about utilities being shut off
 - Unsafe behaviors such as leaving food burning on the stove
 - Frequent falls
 - Frequent memory lapses

- Getting lost on familiar, well-traveled routes
- As long as Martha's parents remain reasonably competent, earning mostly A's and B's on the caregiver checklist, they have every legal and moral right to make their own decisions, and Martha needs to respect this.
- While Martha's parents may not be ready to accept help just yet, she can use this time to research community resources, along with legal and financial questions, so that she knows what's available when they are ready to discuss it. She can stay in touch with other family members and close friends, to get their input and to get a sense for who might be willing to provide support when needed.

What's next...?

Martha needs to find creative ways to overcome her parents' resistance and facilitate the process. How she communicates her concerns to her parents is the key. For example: "Have you thought about ... " when discussing her parents needs for help with personal hygiene and suggesting using a home health aide. Or, "Would you like ... for your birthday?" if her parents are reluctant to hire a needed service, such as a cleaning service. Martha needs to think in terms of taking down walls (of resistance), and building bridges. This approach is respectful and avoids confrontation, so everyone benefits!

Last thoughts...

May is Older Americans' Month, and there is plenty of evidence that older

people are living longer and staying healthier and more active much later in life. This year's theme is "Celebrate Long-Term Living", selected by the Administration on Aging (AoA) to recognize and honor the valuable contributions of older persons to their communities as they age.

We can celebrate our aging loved ones more personally, as well. I'd like to suggest that you spend a day with your parents, grandparents, or another older American. Play a game together or go for a walk. Ask them what they did for fun when they were your age. Ask them to tell you stories about family members. Not only will you learn something new, but you'll have a lot of fun, too. If your loved one is out of town, send them a card or letter. Tell them how much you care about them. Consider visiting a nursing home and talking to the residents there. Most residents love to have visitors.

References:

www.aoa.gov/press/oam/oam.asp

www.girlpower.gov/girlarea/05may/olderamericansmonth.htm

www.thirdage.com/features/family

And Thou Shalt Honor: The Caregiver's Companion. Rodale Publishers. 2002.
Ed. McLeod, B.W.

More resources

If you want more information about resources, the Caregiver Resource Network can help. The Network's web page (www.caregiverresource.net) can provide you with information about programs and services, fact sheets, and a questionnaire about caregiver strain. Or call Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan (616) 456.5664, or (888) 456.5664.

If you have a question you would like to see addressed in a future article, feel free to contact Hanni Epp at: Caregiver's Corner, West Michigan Caregivers Alliance, 233 E. Fulton, Ste. 222,

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Column written by Hanni Epp, MA, therapist and consultant in private practice at West Michigan Caregivers Alliance. She is also a member of Caregiver Resource Network, a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing information and support for family and professional caregivers within the community. Be sure to look for the Caregiver's Corner in the next edition of Mature Lifestyles.