

The Health Corner: Good neighbors, friends can be best allies in preserving older Texans' independence

Written by Submitted by Robin Kent, RN, PA-C, Primary Care Associates of Leonard
Thursday, 05 May 2011 15:51 -

April 28, 2011 - What scares us about aging? Surveys show it's not the stuff we joke about (baldness, cellulite, unhip musical tastes) but a fear we seldom mention: loss of independence.

Makes sense. It's merely embarrassing when Detroit ads start to seem compelling. Stronger emotions take over when we think about losing our ability to work, drive, manage our money or remain in our own home. That's why many older people -- even those we know well -- don't ask us for help when their physical or mental condition starts to decline.

How can we balance our respect for older Texans' autonomy with concern for their well-being? The first step is to recognize signs that a person may need help taking care of their home, health or personal affairs. Be prepared to offer or seek help when a neighbor:

Lets their home fall into disrepair or stops doing common tasks such as mowing a lawn, carrying trash to the curb, retrieving mail or trimming shrubs away from windows.

Has utilities disconnected or cutoff warnings attached to their door.

Loses interest in personal grooming or social interaction -- or seems confused or disoriented when they speak.

Has obvious trouble with driving or a lot of recent damage to their vehicle (a possible sign of frequent minor accidents) or long-expired inspection and registration tags.

Has bruises or other signs of possible physical abuse or neglect.

If you're in an older person's home, be alert to signs such as:

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Decaying food left out or spoilage-prone foods not returned to the refrigerator.

Range burners left on when nothing is cooking, or flammable items left on the stovetop.

Evidence that pets are being neglected or signs (such as strong odors) that their waste is not being disposed of.

Non-functional appliances, plumbing fixtures, lights, heaters or air conditioners.

Piles of trash, unopened mail, unread newspapers or dirty laundry.

Government office workers, retail employees or others who work with the public also can help. Take notice when a previously alert customer has trouble recalling basic information about finances, property or other assets.

Businesses and governments also should be vigilant when an older customer is accompanied by someone who appears to be inappropriately monitoring or controlling their financial affairs.

Be aware of all of these signs and trust your instincts. Everyone has "bad days," but a clear pattern of decline may call for expert evaluation and special services. Often, the result will be resources that help the person continue independent life in a safer, healthier environment.

In cases of moderate physical or mental decline, consider speaking directly to the person or a family member (if available) and offering to help them find independence-oriented resources. One of the best is the Texas Department of Aging and Disability Services. Go to their website, www.dads.state.tx.us, and click on Help for Texans.

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Another excellent source of public and private help is 2-1-1 Texas. Dial 2-1-1 from anywhere in the state or go to www.211texas.org.

Many utility companies offer payment schedule adjustments for customers who are facing service termination.

If you believe an older person is being abused, neglected or exploited, call the Department of Family and Protective Services' Abuse Hotline at 800-252-5400 or make your report through their secure website at www.txabusehotline.org. You'll be contacted within 24 hours after an online report.

If the person is in immediate danger, contact local law enforcement.

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