As seen in
JEWISH NEWS of Greater Phoenix

Deciding when a loved one needs care

It's never easy to admit that loved ones can no longer take care of themselves. Our expert offers ideas to help ease the decision-making process.

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Making the decision that your aging parent or loved one needs help is one of the most difficult you will ever have to face. More than likely, you will be met with resistance, and you may find yourself in what appears to be a no-win situation.

Who is going to provide the care? Whether it is family members or an outside service, it's an important decision to make.

The signs

So how do you recognize that your loved one needs help? Here are some signs:

- Poor grooming — sloppy appearance, infrequent bathing
- Basic tasks — difficulty eating, dressing, walking, cooking, managing medications
- Isolation — not maintaining outside friendships or interests, no hobbies
- Erratic attitude — paranoid, refuses to communicate, extremely argumentative, abusing alcohol or drugs
- Dementia — consistent memory lapses, confusion, loss of reasoning skills, difficulty answering questions, gets lost walking or driving, inability to find the right word
- Health — Black and blue marks (may be falling), bed-wetting (urinary incontinence), dehydration (complains of being thirsty), weight loss, problems swallowing

In our busy world, care-giving is already a complicated task, but when multiple family members are involved, the complexities can lead to confusion, frustration and miscommunication.

Look for help

If you find yourself in the position of caring for a loved one, it is important to know that you should access the many resources available to caregivers. Caregivers need information about care-giving and hands-on help.

The idea that responsibility for an ailing or aging parent means the care-giving offspring/adult child takes care of everything alone, while simultaneously continuing to meet the demands of his or her own life and family, can be destructive to the caregiver as well as impractical, and can lead to feelings of frustration, inadequacy and resentment.

In our busy world, care-giving is already a complicated task, but when multiple family members are involved, the complexities can lead to confusion, frustration and miscommunication. Who will take responsibility for what tasks?

Often, the majority of the work is delegated to the family member who has the most available time. Caregivers placed in this position harbor resentment, which leads to the demise of family relationships, the most important support system the loved one so desperately needs.

The individual with the majority of the care-giving burden may experience burnout, which can affect his or her health and decision-making abilities.

Statistics indicate that when caregiver stress is at an all-time high, it can lead to physical and emotional declines.

Compromise or burnout

Care-giving can be a no-win situation, unless other family members commit to providing support through time or money. The exhausted primary caregiver may feel unappreciated or victimized because other family members indicate that he or she is not providing the best care. Or the caregiver might feel guilty about not doing enough to care for his or her loved one. While neither side may want to be seen as "giving in," it may be in the best interests of the loved one, and the entire family, to compromise.

Outside evaluations from physicians or case managers may also prove helpful in deciding on the best course of action. Many loved ones would prefer to remain at home if the cost of care is not prohibitive or if the care necessary does not exceed what can be provided. Many times a trained personal-care provider can provide the majority of care when skilled nursing is not needed. Families should know that there are many options available for assistance. These include in-home care, day care, family counseling and other services.

Game plan is key

The best course of action is to have a game plan. The family members need to sit down and assess their loved one's needs and evaluate if they have the skill sets within the family unit to care for their loved one or if they need to seek outside assistance.

Decisions involving care for a loved one should not be hurried or rushed into.

The family should take its time and weigh all the options available.

Should the family choose outside assistance, remember you are asking someone to care for your loved one in the privacy of their home, so you should be considering more than price when deciding on the care of your loved one. Take the time to research the various in-home care agencies. Ask the prospective care providers the following:

- How do they recruit caregivers?
- What training do they offer to their caregivers at time of hire, in addition to ongoing training?
- Are the caregivers bonded and insured?
- What type of background checks and screenings do they do on their caregivers? Do they check all 50 states?
- Does the agency have a Registered Nurse overseeing the care provided to their clients?
- Does the agency provide a free Plan of Care Assessment performed by a Registered Nurse?

And, finally, ask for a mini-mum of three client references.

Bob Roth is the owner of Cypress HomeCare Solutions, a staffing agency that provides skilled workers for private homes, hospitals and long-term care facilities. Call 602-264-8009 or visit www.cypresshomecare.com.