

# Signs for Support

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Recognizing that someone could benefit from support is as easy as reading the signs. Not for a moment are we suggesting that having someone accept support is easy. This article and the tools within are focused on the step before the discussion. We are focused on assessing the circumstance. The good news for us amateur detectives looking for clues is, the signs are all around us.

What are we looking for? We are looking for change. Change in patterns. Change in behaviour. Change in appearance. Change in attitude. Change. The easiest change to notice is the complete 180 degree change. These are the “impossible-not-to-notice” clues, like someone losing a lot of weight. Sometimes the changes are very subtle and these become hard to mark and decipher, like one dead plant. Sometimes it is a handful of little things.

It is not just that things have changed, but that the change implies something important. The change might imply that this person is at risk of hurting themselves or others. It might mean that the person we are trying to assess is starting to lose some independence, but with the right support could remain happy at home. We are looking to help this person achieve positive and safe utility out of life.

As we are going to list some of the warning signs that support may be needed or beneficial, consider that change can come in one of three forms: 1) mind, 2) body, and 3) mind and body. When the body goes, a helping hand can be just what the person needs to keep independent. When the mind goes, support is required to keep the person safe.

There are thousands of clues to look for. Below are some important clues. The list is structured like a checklist. If you believe that there are signs for a particular section, put a checkmark in the box. Checkmarks on the checklist will help you reference the areas of concern.

**Recent Hospital Visit**

Did the person recently need to go to the hospital for something? Perhaps it was an elective procedure. If so, what will happen when they return home? Will they be able to get around their home easily and safely? Will they be able to bathe, dress themselves, cook, shop...

Perhaps they were rushed to the hospital as an emergency. If so, this is a warning sign that support may be required. Assess the reason why. Would a caregiver involved in supporting the person have prevented the issue or reduced the severity of the issue?

Whether elective or emergency, how is/was the recovery? Slow? Stressful?

## **Chronic Condition Management**

Does the person have a chronic condition that requires vigilant management? Some chronic conditions are easy signs that care may be required. Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, Multiple Sclerosis, and many more, are obvious signs that support is required. What about the less obvious conditions? Diabetes comes to mind. Poor diabetes management can be fatal. What about severe arthritis. Debilitating pain can interfere with all aspects of life. Daily tasks that we may take for granted, like shaving, bathing, dressing, cooking and feeding ourselves may feel like painful impossibilities for someone with severe arthritis. Medication may help, but it may not be enough. Support may be helpful in maintaining independence at home.

## **Weight Loss**

Weight loss, especially over a short period of time, is not a good thing. It could be caused by poor nutrition.

- Many older adults fail to have a good diet. Many think that they can get by on tea and cookies. They can't. Like any age, it is important to follow the Canada Food Guide and have a balanced diet.
- Perhaps they are not motivated to cook for one.
- Perhaps they are not able to get to the store.
- Perhaps they forget. This is a more severe concern. This level of forgetfulness is a dementia warning sign. Forgetting a meal here or there in a busy schedule happens. If they are not overly busy, then one should look for other signs of dementia.
- Perhaps they lack an appetite. A lack of appetite could be due to depression. It could also be due to a disease or sickness.

## **Unpleasant Odor**

- Their home.** Spoiled food, unchanged kitty litter, dirty home, overflowing garbage, backed up sinks, there is a lot that can cause unpleasant home odors. Was their home always like this?
- Their person.** What about their personal odor?
  - Are they bathing?
  - Are they changing their clothes?
  - And now for a more sensitive question, do you question their continence? This is sensitive, but very important. No one wants to speak about older adult

continence. Ignoring it is no solution. It is a health risk, but with support, can be easily managed.

- Are there continence related smells on their person?
- Are there these types of smells on couches, carpets or beds?
- Are there noticeable stains?

### **Marks, Bruises, Sprains and Broken Bones**

These physical body warning signs may have come from a fall. How, when, where and why did they fall?

- Was it getting in and out of the tub or shower?
- Was it doing work around the house?
- Was it at night going from bed to the bathroom?
- Was it hustling to get to the bathroom to avoid a continence accident?
- Was it slipping from a continence accident?
- Was it from dizziness or vertigo?
- Was it from lack of balance?
- Was it from difficulty getting out of a chair or a bed?

### **Signs of Depression**

Depression amongst older adults is quite common.

- Many feel isolated and lonely.
- Many feel a lack of purpose.
- Many are mourning friends, family or spouses.
- Many are depressed due to chemical imbalances from neurological changes.
- Many are depressed as a side effect of taking certain medications.

Whatever the reason(s), there are many signs of depression to look for.

- Unexplained or aggravated aches and pains.
- Feelings of hopelessness or helplessness.
- Anxiety and worries.
- Memory problems.
- Lack of motivation and energy.
- Slowed movement and speech.
- Irritability.
- Loss of interest in socializing and hobbies.
- Neglecting personal care (skipping meals, forgetting meds, neglecting personal hygiene).

As you read through the list, you may notice the similarity in traits between depression and dementia. Below is a helpful chart to delineate the two.

<b>Is it Depression or Dementia?</b>	
<b>Symptoms of Depression</b>	<b>Symptoms of Dementia</b>
Mental decline is relatively rapid	Mental decline happens slowly
Knows the correct time, date, and where he or she is	Confused and disoriented; becomes lost in familiar locations
Difficulty concentrating	Difficulty with short-term memory
Language and motor skills are slow, but normal	Writing, speaking, and motor skills are impaired
Notices or worries about memory problems	Doesn't notice memory problems or seem to care

### **Signs of Dementia**

- Memory loss that affects day-to-day function: It's normal to forget things occasionally and remember them later: a person with Dementia may forget things more often and not remember them later, especially things that have happened more recently. Repeating questions or stories is a sign to look for.
- Difficulty performing familiar tasks: A person with dementia may have trouble with tasks that have been familiar to them all their lives, such as preparing a meal.
- Problems with language: A person with Dementia may forget simple words or substitute words, making sentences difficult to understand.
- Disorientation of time and place: It's normal to forget the day of the week or your destination -- for a moment. A person with Dementia can become lost on their own street, not knowing how they got there or how to get home.
- Poor or decreased judgment: A person with Dementia may have decreased judgment, for example not recognizing a medical problem that needs attention or wearing heavy clothing on a hot day or light clothing on a cold Canadian winter day.
- Problems with abstract thinking: From time to time, people may have difficulty with tasks that require abstract thinking, such as balancing a cheque book. Someone with Dementia may have significant difficulties with such tasks, for example not recognizing what the numbers in the cheque book mean.
- Misplacing things: Anyone can temporarily misplace a wallet or keys. A person with Dementia may put things in inappropriate places: an iron in the freezer or a wristwatch in the sugar bowl.

- Changes in mood and behaviour: Everyone becomes sad or moody from time to time. Someone with Dementia can exhibit varied mood swings -- from calm to tears to anger - - for no apparent reason.
- Changes in personality: People's personalities can change somewhat with age. A person with Dementia can become confused, suspicious or withdrawn. Changes may also include apathy, fearfulness or acting out of character.
- Loss of initiative: A person with Dementia may become very passive, and require cues and prompting to become involved.

\*Note, sometimes the symptoms of Dementia share the signs of depression.

- Not opening important mail or paying bills.
- Not managing personal affairs.
- Missing appointments.

These things could be caused from the apathy associated with depression or the abstract thinking issues of Dementia.

#### **Neurological Issues (Dementia and more)**

- Dead plants
- Neglected animals
- Hoarding or not throwing things away
- Disorganized and disorderly home
- Burnt pots – Forgetting something on the stove
- Signs of fire (burn marks or tampered with fire detectors)
- Miss-used appliances (using an appliance for an unintended purpose)
- Multiple items purchased (too many tooth pastes, multiple copies of the same magazine)
- Multiple withdrawals on the same day from the bank
- Unaccounted for sums of money
- Repetitive donations to the same charity
- Stale, expired or rotten food

#### **General Signs**

- Trouble getting up from the seated position
- Wandering
- Unexplained dents, dings, scratches and other signs of accidents on their car
- Forgetting to take medications
- Having trouble cleaning and maintaining the home
- Open wounds












## **Your Gut Feel**

Always trust your gut. Maybe it was something they said. Maybe it was something they didn't say. Perhaps something in the tone they used.

What does your gut say? Could they use some support?

You have checkmarks. Now what? If you believe that there are significant medical concerns, then you should approach the person's doctor. However, what if it is not a significant medical concern? Three dead plants and dents on the car bumper may not concern the doctor, but it may concern you. If you are looking for someone to discuss this with, call one of our Care Planners. Our professional Care Planners deal with this every day. They know what type of support could help and what community resources you could engage.

Once you see the signs you should act. You are not alone. We are here to help.

-  Brampton 905-764-9898
-  Burlington-Oakville 905-331-4663
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