

## Introduction

*Worried about your parents, but not quite sure what to do?*

Or maybe you have a specific question in mind. Concerns I often hear from families include:

- Are my parents safe living on their own?
- How can I find help for my father who lives alone?
- I'm worried that my dad isn't taking good care of himself.
- Could my mom be getting Alzheimer's disease?
- I'm worried my mom might fall at home and get hurt.
- Is it time to move to assisted living?

This quick start guide won't provide you with instant answers to the questions above.

But it will help you. That's because answering the questions above always starts with two key steps:

1. Check for common red flags in key problem areas, and
2. Get help identifying what underlying health and life problems are causing the problems.

In other words, this guide will help you **turn worries into a list of specific issues that you can then problem-solve for.**

## How to Use This Quick Start Guide

To help you spot common problems that might be driving your worries, this guide is organized into five sections. Each section corresponds to an important area of senior safety and wellbeing, and includes a **checklist of common problems you can watch out for:**

1: Life Tasks

2: Safety

3: Physical Health

4: Mood & Brain  
Health

5: Medication Safety  
& Management

To make the problem-solving more manageable, each section also provides you with:

- Who to ask for help, for each area of concern, and
- Practical tips to better address common problems.

## Caveats & Disclaimers

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Using this document means you have read and acknowledge the following caveats and disclaimers:

- **This quick guide is provided for information and educational purposes only.** This information is not to be construed as medical advice. Although this tool may help you better interface with doctors and other health professionals, it cannot be used a substitute for a medical encounter. This information is to be used at your own risk based on your own judgment. For my full Disclaimer, please go to [betterhealthwhileaging.net/disclaimer](https://betterhealthwhileaging.net/disclaimer).
- **This quick guide is not guaranteed to help you uncover each and every problem that might be affecting your parents.** If you are looking for a very comprehensive assessment, you'll need to work in person with a professional. (See Resources section at the end.)
- **This guide is best suited to help you assess a parent who lives independently, and has not been diagnosed with Alzheimer's or another dementia.** You may still find the "What to watch for" sections useful if your parent lives in a facility, or has diagnosed memory problems. However facilities and/or dementia often bring on additional common problems that are **not** listed in this information document.

## Area 1: Life Tasks

### What to Watch For:

#### Any Problems with Activities of Daily Living?

- ☐ Walking And Getting Around
- ☐ Dressing
- ☐ Using The Toilet Independently
- ☐ Bathing
- ☐ Grooming (e.g. shaving, fixing hair)
- ☐ Feeding (e.g. getting food into the mouth, swallowing)

#### Any problems with Instrumental Activities of Daily Living?

- ☐ Finances
- ☐ Transportation (e.g. driving, using public transit)
- ☐ House Cleaning & Chores
- ☐ Shopping
- ☐ Meal Preparation
- ☐ Using Telephone & Managing Mail
- ☐ Managing Medications (see pg 7 for more on this issue)

### Who to Ask for Help:

- A doctor or other health professional can help identify & manage health conditions causing these problems.
- Occupational & physical therapists can offer adaptive devices & home modification.
- Social workers & geriatric care managers can assist with evaluation & arrange for help with life tasks.

Life tasks are fundamental self-care activities that we either do for ourselves, or need someone to do for us.

It's important to spot problems with life tasks. New problems can be a sign of a medical problem that needs attention. Social workers and others also check on life tasks in order to identify what kind of help is needed, to maintain a senior's safety and wellbeing.

Professionals usually categorize the key life tasks as Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) and Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADLs).

#### PRACTICAL TIPS

- Be sure to get help understanding why your parent is having the problem. The right treatment / adaptations depend on understanding why the problem is happening.
- You need to clarify what's going on, in order to figure out what you can do now, and what to expect in the future.



### For More Information:

[What are Activities of Daily Living \(ADLs\) & Instrumental Activities of Daily Living \(IADLs\)?](#)

[4 Things to Do When an Older Person Resists Help](#)

## Area 2: Safety

### What to Watch For:

#### Any Concerns Regarding:

##### Finances

- ☐ Any problems paying bills?
- ☐ Any concern about financial exploitation or scams?

##### Memory & Thinking

- ☐ Any wandering or getting lost?
- ☐ Any problems forgetting about stove or other home equipment?
- ☐ Other concerns regarding poor safety awareness or poor judgment?

##### Driving

- ☐ Any accidents or close calls?
- ☐ Do passengers feel worried?

##### Elder Abuse

- ☐ Any concern about emotional, verbal, or physical abuse?
- ☐ Any concern that someone is financially taking advantage?

##### Health

- ☐ Any falls?
- ☐ Repeated trips to the emergency room (ER) or hospital?

### Who to Ask for Help:

- A doctor or other health professional can help identify & manage health conditions causing these problems.
- Social workers & geriatric care managers can help your family develop a plan to address financial safety, or safety problems due to thinking issues.
- Your local Area Agency on Aging can refer you to Adult Protective Services and other resources, if indicated.

Safety is understandably a top priority for most families. Older parents are often concerned as well, but may be more willing to trade safety for autonomy and independence.

Identifying specific safety concerns will allow you to take more specific, practical actions to help your parents be safer.

#### PRACTICAL TIPS

Many problems with finances or poor safety awareness track back to underlying thinking problems.

- Look for clinicians with experience assessing older adults.
- Driving problems may be due to vision, mobility, or thinking problems.



#### For More Information:

[Financial Exploitation in Aging: What to Know & What to Do](#)

[Consumer Reports: What to do when you suspect financial abuse](#)

[8 Behaviors to Take Note of if You Think Someone Might Have Alzheimer's](#)

[National Institute on Aging: Older Drivers](#)

[8 Things to Have the Doctor Check After an Aging Person Falls](#)

## Area 3: Physical Health

### What to Watch For:

#### Have you Noticed:

- ☐ Frequent ER visits or hospitalizations?
- ☐ Obvious declines in strength or health?
- ☐ Falls?
- ☐ Weight loss or poor appetite?
- ☐ Complaints of pain?
- ☐ Complaints of other uncomfortable symptoms?
- ☐ Decreased involvement in life activities due to health problems?
- ☐ Anything that worries you or your parents when it comes to health?

### Who to Ask for Help:

- A doctor or other health professional can help identify & manage health conditions causing these problems.
- Patient advocates and patient navigators can help ensure your parent gets the right care, and that their health questions are answered.
- Consider a second opinion from a geriatrician or other specialist, to make sure nothing medically important is being overlooked. A second opinion can also uncover other treatment options that might be a better fit for your family.

Many older adults live with chronic health problems. But if you notice any of the problems listed, it may be time to be more proactive about your parent's healthcare.

These red flags are either very important for quality of life, or are signs that a health problem might need more attention.

#### PRACTICAL TIPS

Doctors are often rushed and it's easy for things to fall through the cracks. Consider:

- Learning to help your parent be more proactive as a patient,
- Reading about your parent's main conditions online,
- Connecting with other patients or caregivers online, to get ideas on how to optimize care.



### For More Information:

[What to Do About Unintentional Weight Loss](#)

[How to Prevent, Detect, & Treat Dehydration in Aging Adults](#)

[7 Commonly Neglected Problems to Address for Healthier Aging](#)

[Preventing Falls in Older Adults](#)

## Area 4: Mood & Brain Health

### What to Watch For:

#### Have you Noticed:

- ☐ Frequent sadness?
- ☐ Loss of interest in activities your parent used to enjoy?
- ☐ Personality changes?
- ☐ Paranoia, delusions, or odd new beliefs?
- ☐ Hopelessness?
- ☐ Excessive or unusual worrying?
- ☐ Memory problems?
- ☐ Difficulty learning things?
- ☐ Difficulty organizing oneself?
- ☐ New difficulties with mental tasks?
- ☐ Mistakes in driving?
- ☐ Mistakes with finances?
- ☐ Unusual spending of money?
- ☐ Lack of social activities or purposeful activities?
- ☐ Loneliness?

### Who to Ask for Help:

- A doctor or other health professional can help identify & manage health conditions causing these problems
- Therapists, social workers and trained counselors can help provide treatment for depression and anxiety. They can also help people diagnosed with cognitive problems process the diagnosis and learn to cope better.
- Senior centers can provide social activities and volunteer opportunities, which are essential for mood and brain health.

Worried about depression? Anxiety? Memory? This page lists the most common red flags to look out for, and get help with.

#### PRACTICAL TIPS

- Depression and cognitive changes are common in older adults. They can be hard to tease apart, and it's possible for your parent to be affected by both at the same time.
- Look for a geriatrician, a geriatric psychologist, or a geriatric psychiatrist for extra expertise in evaluating these problems.
- Working, volunteering, or otherwise pursuing activities that give a sense of purpose is very good for an older person's mental well-being.



#### For More Information:

[HelpGuide.org: Depression in Older Adults: Recognizing the Signs and Getting the Right Treatment](#)

[6 Causes of Paranoia in Aging & What to Do](#)

[How We Diagnose Dementia: The Practical Basics to Know](#)

[Cognitive Impairment in Aging: 10 Common Causes & 10 Things the Doctor Should Check](#)

[What You Can Do if You're Worried About "Incompetence"](#)

[Incompetence & Losing Capacity: Answers to 7 FAQs](#)

## Area 5: Medication Safety & Management

### What to Watch For:

#### Have you Noticed:

- ☐ Difficulty affording prescriptions?
- ☐ Difficulty taking all prescriptions as recommended?
- ☐ Not refilling medications regularly?
- ☐ Skipping certain medications?
- ☐ Side-effects or worrisome symptoms related to medication?

### Who to Ask for Help:

- A doctor can review all medications and address whether each is necessary and currently offering a health benefit.
- A pharmacist can answer questions about side-effects and can suggest ways to simplify the medication routine.

Medications often play a special role in an aging person's life, and sometimes take up a lot of time and money. They can be vital to keeping certain health conditions under control, but they also can cause side-effects or other health problems.

This page lists the most common medication problems to look out for:

#### PRACTICAL TIPS

- It's often possible to reduce or eliminate medications, but you have to ask for help.
- Many common problems (pain, depression, arthritis) can be treated with non-drug methods. Ask the doctor about non-drug alternatives, especially if the drug isn't working well.
- Many drugs are actually risky for older adults, but remain commonly prescribed. You can find these on the [Beer's List](#), maintained by the American Geriatrics Society.



#### Other resources/ideas:

- Reconsider Medicare D prescription plan.
- Apply for discount from pharmacy or drug manufacturer.
- Try using a Mediset, a medication management app, or another tool to organize medications more easily.

### For More Information:

[How to Review Medications for Safety & Appropriateness](#)

[How to Choose the Safest Over-the-Counter Painkiller for Seniors](#)

[10 Types of Medications to Review if You're Concerned About Falling](#)

[6 Common Medication Problems in Aging, & What You Can Do](#)

[4 Types of Brain-Slowing Medication to Avoid if You're Worried About Memory](#)

[The 2015 American Geriatrics Society Updated Beers Criteria: Medications that Older Adults Should Avoid or Use with Caution](#)

### Resources & Useful Links:

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- [Aging Life Care Association](#) (formerly the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers) – This site provides information about what geriatric care managers (now called aging life care professionals) do, as well as a directory to help you find care managers in your area.
- [Administration on Aging: Eldercare Locator](#) – Enter your zip code and this government website will list your local Area Agency on Aging, along with a variety of other local government resources that can help you manage senior problems.
- [Family Caregiver Alliance](#) – This well-established non-profit has lots of resources for families caring for a relative, whether you're just starting the journey or are a long-time caregiver in need of support. The "Family Care Navigator" feature provides resources for every state.
- [National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse](#) – This non-profit organization offers practical information about different types of elder abuse, along with tips on how to investigate.
- [Consumer Reports: What to do when you suspect financial abuse](#) – This is a well-written article which includes examples of common financial abuse scenarios, suggestions on what to do, and a good list of additional online resources.
- [Alzheimer's Association: 10 Early Signs of Alzheimer's](#) – A good resource for people concerned about memory or thinking problems. Lists 10 common signs of early dementia, compares them to normal age-related changes, and provides tips on what to do next.
- [California DMV: Senior Driver Re-Examinations](#) – This page describes California's process for evaluating senior drivers. Includes information on what triggers a re-evaluation. Many states have developed similar regulations and processes; check your local Department of Motor Vehicles website.
- [AARP Driver Safety: We Need to Talk](#) – Free self-paced online seminar designed to help you determine how to assess your loved ones' driving skills and provide tools to help you have this important conversation.
- [Health in Aging](#) – The consumer health information website of the American Geriatrics Society. The section on [medications in older adults](#) is especially useful.
- [Daughterhood.org](#) – A website with a special focus on supporting women caring for aging parents. Particularly helpful to those struggling with guilt or overwhelm.
- [AgingCare.com Caregiver Forum](#) – This is a particularly active online forum for people caring for aging parents, spouses, and other relatives. An excellent place to get support and ideas from other family caregivers.
- [Better Health While Aging](#) (formerly Geriatrics for Caregivers) – Practical information on aging health and on helping older parents. Includes information on healthy aging, preventing falls, medication safety, managing Alzheimer's, planning for end-of-life, and coping with common caregiving challenges.



## About Dr. Leslie Kernisan and Better Health While Aging:

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Leslie Kernisan, MD MPH, is a practicing geriatrician who believes that it shouldn't be so hard for older adults and families to navigate late-life challenges. You can read more about her story and her background [here](#).

Better Health While Aging provides practical information on how to address many common health problems that affect older adults. We also address common concerns and dilemmas related to helping older parents and other aging relatives.

Visit [BetterHealthWhileAging.net](https://BetterHealthWhileAging.net) to find more useful articles on senior health, family caregiving, and helping older parents.

You can also get lots of great tips on aging health and helping older parents by listening to the [free Better Health While Aging podcast](#).