

Red Flags
That an Older Adult May Need Help
A Fact Sheet To Share

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The following information is designed to help you make an informed decision about referring a person for help. Trust your intuition and know that your compassion and effort may prevent the premature or unnecessary institutionalization of an older adult. Remember that most problems don't happen overnight – they usually have a slow progression that can be missed even by persons closest to the individual. An individual's uncharacteristic behavior, unkempt appearance and bizarre expressions often reveal underlying problems. In the elderly population, extreme anger, hostility and agitation could indicate emotional, mental or physical ailments. Marked personality changes are not a normal part of aging and are likely to be indicative of a problem. Most people experience a mental or emotional problem for the first time after 60 years of age, and it is the 60+ age group that commits suicide at a higher rate than any other group.

The following are areas to observe that may provide you with “red flags”, or indicators that an older adult is in need of help. These indicators will serve as useful information when you are making a referral.

General red flags:

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|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Unjustified fear | Unexplained injuries |
| Unreasonable excuses | Refusal to have visitors |
| Unwarranted suspicion | Multiple medications |
| Unwillingness to talk | Isolation or withdrawal |
| Tearfulness | Multiple complaints |
| Agitation or irritability | Burdensome guilt/shame |
| Inability to concentrate | Neglect of duties |
| Neglect of self-care | Feelings of worthlessness |
| Stopping usual routines | Recent losses |
| Mood swings | |

Indicators of failing mental or emotional health:

Confusion	Paranoia
Disorientation	Alcohol or drug abuse
Inappropriate dress	Change in functioning
Forgetfulness	Irrational beliefs
Repetitiveness	Intense anger or irritability
Over-medication	Appears nervous or fidgety
Increased withdrawal	Recent or multiple losses
Disheveled appearance	Difficult to console
Bizarre behavior	Change in appetite
Difficulty sleeping	Suicidal ideation

Indicators of social isolation:

Homebound
Lack of social relationships
No mention of family or friends
Consistent refusal to participate in activities outside of the home
Physical or verbal “barricades” against outsiders

Changes in physical health:

Severe illness	Inability to move easily
Chronic disease changes	Loss of bladder or bowel control
Loss of hearing or vision	Complaints of pain or malaise
New or multiple prescriptions	

Neglect in self-care:

Unkempt appearance	Inappropriate clothing
Dirty / uncombed hair	Body odor
Unshaven	Trash around the home
Dirty clothes	Little food in the home

Neglect of environment:

Clutter everywhere
Strong odors
Disrepair
Garbage left out

Dirty surfaces
Utilities cut off
Neglected animals

Economic hardship:

Inability to manage finances
Loss of financial support

Increased medical expenses
Low income

Suicidal thoughts or expressions:
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Recent or multiple losses
Alcohol or drug abuse
Increased depression
Increased isolation

Sudden happiness
Giving away possessions
Putting affairs in order
Despairing statements

“There’s no use.” “I’m no good to anyone.” “I’d rather be dead.” “I’m just a burden.” “Why go on like this?”....

Follow up on such comments and ask if the person has a plan and the means to carry out the plan. Take their comments VERY seriously and call a local help-line with questions or concerns regarding suicide. You may start by calling the Hopeline Network at 1 800 784-2433.