Sometimes we see changes with older friends or family members that spark concerns. Wanting to help is entirely natural, but those good intentions can sometimes lead to disagreements, frustration, and arguments.

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Five Tips for Tactfully Offering Assistance to a Loved One

By Carolynn Nagao Marcotte
It is a common challenge: what is the best way to tactfully offer assistance? Having worked with many families to help unravel these kinds of issues, I will caution that each circumstance is unique, but the following tips might be helpful:

**Recognize When to Help**

If you are feeling concerned, there is probably a reason, and it is usually a good idea to take a closer look. Common red flags include unpaid bills, missed medical appointments, or signs of memory loss. Changes in appearance can also be important: if the person was always very neat and their home is now cluttered or they appear unkempt, there could be an issue. Sudden weight change could indicate malnutrition. Be respectful, but don’t assume everything is okay, just because it was in the past.
Discuss the Concerns

So you have concerns. The next step is to discuss them. If you think it is a situation where they might eventually need some assistance, my advice is to have that conversation early and often. If you start the discussion before there’s a crisis, it gives everyone more time to think about it. If you wait, the problem might become more difficult to address, and that might lead to more resistance.

Go in with realistic expectations. There is a good chance the older adult will not want to have that conversation and will shut it down. Be respectful. It probably will take more than one conversation, but if you keep bringing up concerns respectfully, it can get easier to address the problem.

Remember to Keep It a Discussion

The best way to have the conversation is to bring it up naturally. If you come in saying, “we need to have a talk” and it is clear you have given it a lot of thought and made up your mind already, it can feel like you are imposing a course of action on somebody else. There is a much higher chance of resistance there. It is much better to bring it up as part of an open-ended conversation, where you are valuing their input as well.

A good way to do this is to start with a general conversation. Maybe you are talking to your mother and she tells you about a friend who recently transitioned to assisted living. That might be a good opportunity to ask questions and get an idea of what she envisions for herself. Conversations in that context can be much easier, and you can get an idea of what they want.

Call a Professional

A professional opinion can often be helpful for these discussions. If there are health concerns, a primary care doctor might be able to offer helpful advice. If the concerns are more in-home and behavioral, your local elder services agency might be a good place to start; they have social workers who can assess the risk factors and help develop a plan of action.

In addition to benefiting from the professional advice, this can also help take the pressure off you, the person who has concerns.

Care Resistance

It is fairly common for a family member to take the above steps, only to discover their loved one still doesn’t want any help. Often this is the result of the two people coming at the question with differing goals. Most of the time family members and professionals value health and safety and extending life as long as possible, above all other factors. But older adults often prioritize autonomy and independence. They usually want to live in their home, with their current lifestyle, as long as possible.

This is why the discussion is so important. If you want to help, you need to listen and validate what they want. If you do that, there may be room for compromise where change is needed most.

Carolynn Nagao Marcotte is a licensed social worker and former case manager for Adult Family Care, a non-profit program at Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services that supports in-home caregivers across the Greater Boston, North Shore, and Merrimack Valley areas. For more information, call 617-628-2601 or visit adultfamilycare.org.
The social and health benefits of Meals on Wheels were recently featured on the Magic 106.7 podcast, Exceptional Women. The episode featured Deb McLean, who is Nutrition Programs Director at Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services (SCES). Speaking on behalf of a consortium of 27 agencies that provide Meals on Wheels across Massachusetts, McLean said the program plays a vital role in combating malnutrition and food insecurity.

“We have people who tell us if it wasn’t for the program they wouldn’t have enough food, because they have to pay electricity and other bills,” said McLean. “Malnutrition is a huge part of why seniors end up with diseases and chronic illness.”

Meals on Wheels served more than 9 million meals to roughly 75,000 older adults in Massachusetts last year. Roughly a third of those clients report that they would otherwise face food shortages.

“That number shocked me,” said Exceptional Women host Sue Tabb. Meals on Wheels is funded through the Older Americans Act, which supports a wide range of in-home and community-based services. McLean described Meals on Wheels as cost effective, noting it costs $1,851 per year, per client. Conversely, a one-day hospital visit for malnutrition costs $3,000, and a 10-day stay in a nursing home is $4,000.

“We want to help seniors remain in their homes, if that’s what they choose,” said McLean. “So we try to provide services to help them do that.”

Meals on Wheels provider regularly conduct satisfaction surveys. In the most recent survey, 83
Want to make a difference in the community? The Medical Advocate program at Somerville Cambridge Elder Services (SCES) is currently seeking caring volunteers to help older adults navigate medical appointments. We will introduce you to an individual living in the community who might otherwise be unable to regularly attend medical appointments.

The goal of the program is to contact the client’s case manager or emergency help if there is a problem, explained McLean.

“Our drivers are key in combating isolation; sometimes they’re the only person the client sees all day,” said McLean.

The meal delivery also serves as a wellness check, and the drivers will contact the client’s case manager or emergency help if there is a problem, explained McLean.

The discussion also touched on other nutrition programs and hospital-to-home services provided by SCES. McLean has been with the agency more than 15 years, adding she chose that field because of the mission.

“I think what I’m hearing, and you’re probably too humble to say this, but you’re directly impacting the quality of people’s lives,” said Tabb.

“I hope so,” said McLean. “I try.”

Exceptional Women is an award-winning podcast that features inspiring women. It airs Sunday mornings at 7:30 on Magic 106.7, and is available at the station website.

Medical Advocates Needed in Cambridge and Somerville

Want to make a difference in the community? The Medical Advocate program at Somerville Cambridge Elder Services (SCES) is currently seeking caring volunteers to help older adults navigate medical appointments. We will introduce you to an individual living in the community who might otherwise be unable to regularly attend medical appointments.

The goal of the program is to ensure that older adults are able to attend their appointments, that their concerns are being addressed, and to offer help interpreting and making use of their health information, helping them to continue live independently.

Advocates often form long term relationships with these individuals.

For more information, call the SCES Volunteer Program Coordinator at 617-628-2601, x3214 or e-mail to vol@eldercare.org.
As we know, caregiving is a full-time job that often requires coordinating many moving pieces. Medication is usually a key part of that picture, and it often falls on caregivers to ensure that things stay on track.

Roughly 83 percent of Americans take at least one medication daily, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Used correctly, medications are generally safe—though the CDC cautions that adverse drug reactions cause more than one million emergency room visits each year.

Allergic reactions, unexpected side effects and human error are common factors behind adverse reactions, so as a caregiver it’s important to be aware of the potential pitfalls, and to ensure prescriptions are taken properly.

The following is a quick set of tips to help family caregivers manage medications:

**Know Your Medicines**

If you are going to help with medications, it’s vital you know what you’re dealing with. Know the name of each medication, why they are taking it, and the possible side effects. Many medications have the potential for side effects, but are prescribed because the benefits likely outweigh the risk—so it’s important to know the signs of trouble. Make sure you understand the instructions and only use as directed.
List Your Medicines

Maintaining a comprehensive list of medications, with dosage and schedule, is helpful on several levels. It relieves the burden of trying to remember everything. It’s also a good idea to have this information handy if there is a hospitalization or another emergency. Don’t forget to list over-the-counter medications as well!

Reconcile Medications

The interaction between some medicines can produce potentially life-threatening side effects, so it’s important for medical personnel to be aware of the big picture. Have an extra copy of the medication list, so you can provide it when a hospitalization occurs. Be sure to take note if anything new is added over the course of a hospital stay. Ask questions if you are concerned about how the new prescriptions might interact.

Dispose of Meds Properly

Nothing good comes of having a medicine cabinet filled with medications that are no longer necessary. Many medicines can be flushed down the toilet. Meds can also be thrown away, but it’s best to mix them with something unappealing, such as coffee grounds. Be sure to put the mixture in a sealed container before putting it in the trash. Many communities also host drug takeback days. An easy way to find out about those is through the Drug Enforcement Administration website, DEA.gov.

Seek Professional Advice

Your doctor and pharmacist are important resources. Don’t be afraid to ask them questions, especially if you don’t understand something. Some caregiver support programs can also be helpful. Our program, Adult Family Care, helps caregivers follow the best practices on medication management, and also provides regular training on the topic.

Those are the basics of medication management, and hopefully you now feel a little more empowered to take charge of this often daunting aspect of caregiving. While the vast majority of caregivers have no formal background in medicine, it’s important to recognize that a little preparation and mindfulness can go a long way toward helping a loved one successfully manage medications.

Angela Clary is a licensed clinical social worker and the Outreach Specialist for Adult Family Care, a non-profit program at Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services that supports in-home caregivers across the Greater Boston, North Shore, and Merrimack Valley areas. For more information please call 617-628-2601 ext 3107 or email aclary@eldercare.org.
About Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services

Somerville Cambridge Elder Services (SCES) is a non-profit elder services agency that's dedicated to helping people maintain independence and well-being at home. We facilitate many state and federal programs, which can be accessed through our Aging Information Center. This free community resource provides ready access to the following:

Information & Guidance Aging can be complicated. But our Elder Care Advisors are experts on aging, caregiving, and disability issues—and can facilitate access to resources that can help.

In-Home Services We provide a wide range of programs that support health and well-being, including Meals on Wheels, caregiver support, and assistance with daily tasks (such as housecleaning and personal care) through our Home Care program.

Volunteer Programs Our volunteer programs help older adults maintain their current lifestyle, providing everything from basic companionship to medical advocacy.

For More Information Contact our Aging Information center at 617-628-2601 during regular business hours, visit our website, eldercare.org, and follow us on Facebook and Twitter!

Questions, Comments, or Suggestions
Contact the editor, email info@eldercare.org or call 617-628-2601