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are my parents ok?

a guide to navigating the parent role reversal

Authored by

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As the years pass and we grow from children into adulthood, our relationship with older loved ones changes. Instead of being cared for by them, it becomes our turn to worry more for them and to want to do what we can to help them stay well and happy.

An extended “family” of offspring including children and grandchildren, as well as nieces, nephews, and friends and neighbours all play a vital role supporting the elderly in our communities. From domestic chores such as shopping and laundry, to sorting out health issues, finances or just providing a ready ear to listen to their worries, the older generation needs the younger one. And never more so – people are living longer than ever. Life expectancy in some areas of the UK is now well into the 90’s. According to Age UK¹ there are now about 12 million people in the UK aged 65 and above, which represents more than 1 in 6 of the population, and 1.7 million are aged over 85.

As many as 1 in 3 of these, over-65 year-olds, live alone. Most remain quite capable and able to look after themselves. So the main contribution from younger family and friends is simply to provide a watchful eye and an essential source of help in a crisis. For many elderly people, just knowing that someone is there for them if they need assistance is a great comfort, especially if they are frail.

But with an increasing number of people struggling to manage with the chronic health problems that are common in later life, family are being called on more and more to help with the basic activities of daily living. Support from younger fitter family members may be critical in keeping older relatives living reasonably independently in their own homes.

But modern lives are hectic, and many of us have pressurised schedules with busy jobs and our own children to rush around for as well. These days many families are widely scattered too, with people living long distances away from their elderly relatives. As a result they can find it hard to get to see them as often as they would like, or be there to offer regular practical help.

Fortunately, technology is now making it much easier to support older people, and even assist with some of the routine tasks. Most people, for example, have a mobile phone to hand when they want contact. Shopping can be ordered remotely online, and many other services from laundry collection to a visit from the hairdresser, can be arranged from afar. And an increasing number of older people living alone are getting to grips with technology and managing these things themselves.

However, for many people there remains one particularly worrying situation – the “what if” question.

What if something happens to my parent or loved one and they can’t get in touch?

What if they become unwell and I don’t know?

What if they were to fall and be out of reach of the phone? Or even;

What if my loved one doesn’t want me constantly calling them to check if they are OK?

Happily, technology can help you with this – 3rings (the plug that connects to household appliances like the TV or kettle to let you know your parents are okay today) has the answer.

This guide has been prepared to help you look at many of the concerns you may have about supporting older relatives or loved ones. We hope it will help you to help them.



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¹ www.ageuk.org.uk/Documents/EN-GB/Factsheets/Later_Life_UK_factsheet.pdf?dtrk=true

The guide covers a number of topics:

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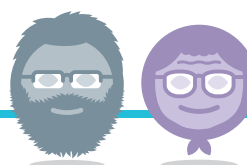
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Mike has recently organised an Occupational Therapist to visit his mother whose health has declined in the past year. "They were great. We organised the visit through Mum's GP the last time I took her in there for a check on her Diabetes. They came to her bungalow and had a very thorough look around while I was there too. They pointed out all sorts of things that could make life easier for her. Now I'm sorting out a conversion of the bathroom to a wet room with a seated shower as she was no longer able to climb into the bath, and grab rails in the toilet. We've moved the table around so that she can rest while she prepares food and we're going to get the local "Farm Foods" company to deliver ready meals that she can store in her freezer and cook easily in the microwave. I also want to put in some sort of remote system so that when I am away, I can still be sure she is ticking along quite happily."

1: When is it time to start offering more support to older relatives and friends?

It could be argued that age or health is irrelevant, and that we all need someone who is generally looking after us at times, and checking occasionally that all is well.

But there's no doubt that as people get older they may need more support. They may become less mobile and less able to get out and about. In addition, chronic health issues can begin to limit a person's previous ability to do everything they need to do. Those health issues may also need extra help, to manage medication or get out to doctor's appointments or see the nurse.

So while the occasional "how are things?" is appreciated by most of us, older people in particular can benefit from more frequent attention or checks. However, most people want to remain independent as long as possible, and may not welcome a barrage of concerned attention from relatives, no matter how well intended. Even when they know they do need help, they may feel too proud to ask. So what should you do?

Know their baseline capabilities

Firstly, it's important to have some sort of idea of your parents' normal routine and capabilities, as these can vary hugely. Then, using this as a baseline, keep a casual monitor of how things are going. Changes in routine should act as a warning bell for action. Or see section 2 for clues that all may not be well.

Know how well their home suits their needs

We all set our homes out to suit ourselves. But over time, changing needs can mean that the home environment is no longer ideal, and older people often need help (or even supportive persuasion) to change the home around. Living in a 4-storey town house may be fine while you can sprint up the stairs without so much as touching the handrail. But it can become an impossible journey to get upstairs to bed if arthritis has taken its toll on your spine. Equally a thatched cottage buried in the countryside may be a rural idyll when you can just hop in and out of a car, but becomes an isolated nightmare if you can no longer safely drive.

Understand their views

Regular communications are essential, so talk to them about how life is going. It isn't simply a matter of how you see it - what's their view on their situation? They may not welcome an onslaught of questions, so find a good time, maybe over a cup of tea or out on a walk, to gently ask how things are going. Pinpoint any particular issues you might have noticed and try to explore them. You may be able to anticipate future troubles so if they are happy to talk, look at these. It's often easier to talk about practical issues rather than focus on emotions, and it may help if you relate to your own daily battles – how do they find the traffic these days? What do they think of the new supermarket and its layout? If you talk regularly to older loved ones, it will be easier to throw in occasional offers of help even when there doesn't seem to be a particular issue. You might be surprised what they take you up on.

How do they manage particular challenges?

We all have occasional extra demands put on us but in later life even small battles can quickly drain resources. Managing health issues is often a good indicator of a person's level of coping. Ask them how they their health generally is.

Are they taking medication regularly, are symptoms like pain, or issues like blood sugars in diabetes, well controlled and do they manage to get up to the hospital for appointments? If they think you are testing them in any way, they may avoid what they perceive to be burdening you with their problems. So be sensitive and keep it like a conversation you might have with your own friends.

Be aware of the fierce desire that older people have to maintain their independence

Many older people fear having their habits and wishes judged. Others fear being a burden on their children. Most simply want to stay in their own homes, living life the way they have chosen for as long as possible. It's important not to push your own standards on them. They may not be able to get round with a Hoover like they used to, or as you would in your own home, but is a little dust really going to do them any harm? On the other hand they may have resorted to a diet of mostly tea and biscuits because they can no longer manage to put together a meal, while you are rightly concerned that they are becoming pale, thin and potentially malnourished. Working out what matters and what doesn't is one of the most difficult things you will have to tackle in trying to help them.



2: What are the clues that they may be in need of extra help?

Here are a few of the signs that an older person may not be coping as well as they used to, and might benefit from some help. But bear in mind that we all change our habits and interests, and that even when someone is less active or able to get out, they may be happily coping with daily needs in different ways.

Their mobility may be deteriorating

- Just walking through the house takes them longer, and they may need to “furniture-cruise” by holding on to different items of furniture to steady themselves as they go
- They may increasingly use a stick or a frame to stay steady
- They have problems simply getting in and out of the house, getting over a step, through a door, and so spend more time indoors
- Their car is left unmaintained, or gathers dust in the garage
- They can't get out to the shops when they want to, and may run out of things at home
- They may have taken to sleeping downstairs on a chair or sofa because getting upstairs to bed is a struggle

They may struggle to do all the basic practical things they need to do

- Instead of a regular freshly prepared meal at least once a day, they are increasingly relying on packaged foods or just biscuits
- There is out-of-date food in cupboards and the fridge, or ready meals are going uneaten
- The home is no longer as clean as it used to be. There may be layers of dust, dirty cups and plates lying around in the kitchen, piles of old newspapers and rubbish bins overflowing or un-emptied
- The bathroom may not have been cleaned for some time, and supplies such as toilet paper or cleaning agents may have run out. In the worst situation there may be stains of urine or faeces in the bathroom or elsewhere in the house (possibly reflecting difficulty getting to the toilet in time)

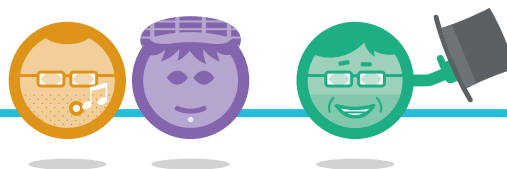
- The person may be wearing grubby or stained clothes, with no fresh laundry. Clothes may have lost buttons or need repairs
- There may be a pile of unopened post, unmet bills or official letters
- They are no longer doing all the social or enjoyable things they have done routinely for years, such as playing golf, getting out to the local pub or digging in the garden
- They may show signs of reduced strength or mobility. This could be a sign of depression and withdrawal, or it might simply be normal changes that most of us accept with age
- They may become more reclusive, refusing to let others, even close family, enter the home

There may be obvious health issues such as

- Deteriorating vision or hearing
- Loss of weight
- Long, overgrown fingernails or toenails (people often find it harder to reach their toes in late life)
- Broken teeth, missing dentures or poor oral hygiene
- Skin infections, leg ulcers or pressure ulcers
- Personal neglect, unkempt hair or beard
- Their mood may seem low, and they may seem anxious or withdrawn

Neighbours or other contacts may report problems

- It's always worth having a quick chat with the neighbours. They may have noticed changes such as milk not taken in, the garden going over to weeds and chaos, odd noises, activity or smells. Your parent's other regular contacts, such as friends or those involved with social events may also be concerned



Ali and Jai look after their elderly uncle, although they both have very busy jobs. “The doctor says he is in the early stages of dementia, but he is happy in his flat and can mostly look after himself. We pop in at weekends and bring the shopping, and sort out his cleaning. But we do worry a lot in between times. He knows that he can call us anytime, and has our numbers. But I often think “what if he became ill, who would know?” His neighbours are elderly too, and very deaf. I think he might be better in some sort of sheltered accommodation but he has always said he would never want to go into a home. I think we do need to start thinking about better ways to support him. Jai works in the software industry and is going to see what sort of technology we could put in to keep an eye on him.

3: What sort of things could you help with ?

There are lots of things that you can do to help an older relative or friend, such as:

Shopping

- Get online to arrange deliveries for them, take them to the shops yourself or why not just roll up regularly with essentials? The big advantage of helping with food shopping is that you can encourage healthy and nutritious choices
- Many people enjoy just the chance to get out, browse a bit and even have tea or lunch, so you could turn shopping into a more sociable treat

Banking & bills

You might simply help your parent to get to the bank or to do online banking. But if its going to be a long term arrangement, it might be best to sort this out formally – the banks are used to family members making arrangements for older relatives and should be able to provide paperwork so that everyone can be sure that matters are sorted in agreement and properly. However, as an older person becomes more frail, it's also worth considering arranging a Lasting Power of Attorney (LPA) for financial matters.

Lasting Power of Attorney (LPA)

This is a legal document that lets your parent (the 'donor') appoint one or more people (known as 'attorneys') to help them make decisions, or to make decisions on their behalf. It will give them more control over what happens if, for example, they have an accident or an illness and can't make decisions at the time they need to be made (this is known as a losing mental capacity).

There are 2 types of LPA:

- Health and welfare
- Property and financial affairs. A person can choose to make one type or both. There's a different process in Scotland and Northern Ireland. You can get more details at: <https://www.gov.uk/power-of-attorney/overview>

Helping with health and medical problems

- An older person can appoint a Lasting Power of Attorney to assist with medical issues too, should they lose capacity to make decisions about their health for themselves. More details at <https://www.gov.uk/power-of-attorney/overview>
- Getting to doctors appointments. You can act as your parents advocate, going with them to the surgery and helping them to explain to their doctor or nurse what sort of health problems they are experiencing. Your presence will be helpful to confirm (or dispute!) what your parent is saying. A second pair of ears to take in what the GP or specialist is advising is always useful as all of us, old and young, often miss half what is said to us in these situations
- There is a whole range of health checks which older people are entitled to, and you can help organise or take them to, including:
 - Eye tests (make sure they take their spectacles or lenses along)
 - Hearing checks (don't forget to take any hearing aids along – older people often don't wear them all the time)
 - Vaccination (such as against 'flu, pneumonia and shingles)
 - Cancer screening
 - Chiropody: in most areas there is a chiropodist service, especially for people with diabetes where foot care is essential (Ask the Diabetes nurse for more information). You may have to take your relative to the clinic, or the chiropodist may visit the home (although you may have to pay for this)

Hairdresser

Most people feel better for a good tidy up. Again, you may have to take them to their local hairdresser, or arrange for a mobile hairdresser to visit.

Social and spiritual wellbeing

Getting out to meet with family and friends or attend religious events is fundamental to wellbeing and a good quality of life. You can offer to help with lifts, or if they cannot leave home, arrange for friends or someone from their church or temple to call in.



4: Making the most of available technology



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Technology can assist in many ways to help keep in touch with older people that you may be concerned about, provide for some of their needs, monitor their problems and call for outside help. Modern technology offers a world of communication, social interaction and information at the touch of a button.

If you struggle with a computer, don't feel embarrassed. Many of us would benefit from updating our computer skills and understanding how to use technology most effectively. Take advantage of free beginner's computer classes, often available in the local library. You could even go along with your older relatives. To find courses local to you, visit <http://www.ageuk.org.uk/work-and-learning/technology-and-internet/computer-training-courses/>. Younger generations tend to be much more familiar with mobile and computer technology, so you could also ask a family member or friend to give you some free advice and help.

From ordering a delivery of ready meals online, to telephone or automated computer based services, which remind a person to take their medication, it's possible to help older or more dependent relatives from afar. However, it's important to recognise that technology should be used to help care, not to replace care. Technology is never a substitute for those calls and visits that many loved ones cherish, but it can help families at least balance the challenges of time and distance.

3rings: The plug that cares

Sometimes all you want to do is keep a general check that your loved one is OK and doing what they usually do without invading their day too often. Technology can help here too. You could set up a remote webcam to monitor them at home but this may seem too intrusive. Another option is '3rings' - a plug that connects to everyday household appliances such as kettles, lamps, televisions, and is placed in the home of an elderly relative who you may be concerned about. Just by Mum turning on the kettle to make a cup of tea or Dad turning on the TV to watch his favourite show, 3rings makes sure that all of the family can get a message each day to reassure them that their parents are OK. And if one day Mum or Dad don't do what they normally do, an alert is sent to the family instead.

You can plug almost any household appliance into a 3rings plug - just choose one you know they use regularly. You then create rules to direct 3rings about when to send messages or alerts. e.g. check Mum boils the kettle to make at least one cuppa between 6am and 9am each day. The older person doesn't need to have access to the internet because the plug sends information via an App on the receiver's mobile phone. In this way, 3rings tells relatives whether the

user has used the kettle, switched on their TV or even turned off their bedside light (signalling that they've made it to bed) at the usual time. It is an unobtrusive way for people to keep an eye on their elderly parents who may not want a daily phone call or to feel like they're being checked up on all the time. They know they are cared for and that if their routine should change, action will be taken to assist them, giving their children increased peace of mind.

Please visit the 3 rings website for more information on this new and innovative product at:
<https://www.3rings.co.uk/>

Other ideas for using technology to help you care for older loved ones include

Age UK Personal Alarm: A personal alarm for use in emergencies, this is complementary to a monitoring device such as the 3rings Plug. Personal alarms can be worn as a pendant or wristband. In the event of a fall or other emergency, the wearer simply pushes a button to activate the alarm which links to an emergency call centre, who will respond to it.

Computer Tablets: These can be a great gift for elderly loved ones, as they are easier to use than computers and more intuitive. There are so many things that they may find them useful for, from connecting to family, catching up on news or reading in large fonts. They may even enjoy the games that their grandchildren play on them!

Free services such as Skype (video phone calls): These can bring familiar faces into the comfort of your own home and the internet is an easy way to keep up to date with local and UK news, as well as global events.

Skype or Facetime can be configured but check out sound levels - most tablets don't have loud enough sound systems built in so you may need to add external speakers

Social media: This isn't just for the "young ones" either - why not help your parent set up a Facebook page and ask your family and friends to share pictures with you to help keep you in touch with family events and grandchildren's activities.



Steve's mum couldn't get out of bed one day and despite having an emergency button and phone close by she didn't want to bother anyone. The 3rings plug alerted her family that she hadn't made her morning cuppa and she was swiftly in an ambulance off to hospital.

5: Making the home environment comfortable and safe

Our homes, as the saying goes, are our castles. But our homes are also full of potential hazards and hidden dangers. When we are young and agile, we are more able to dodge trouble. But as people get older they are slower to react and become more vulnerable to accidents in the home. Conditions such as arthritis restrict easy movement, and the natural decline in vision or hearing reduces sensory awareness, especially when lighting is poor. As a result thousands of older people are admitted to hospital every week in the UK with injuries resulting from accidents in the home.

Occupational Therapy

A lot can be done to reduce the risk and make the home safe. Many hazards can be spotted if you take a careful look around, although its worth getting an expert view. Occupational Therapists (OT) are trained to assess a person's environment and offer advice to make it better adapted to an individual's ability and needs. Talk to your relative's GP about whether it would be possible to arrange for the OT to visit or find an Independent OT (The College of Occupational Therapists can help):

<http://www.cotss-ip.org.uk/find/>

Meanwhile stroll around the property and consider the following:

Access

- How easy is it to get in – are there steps and is there a handrail alongside them?
- Are the door locks secure and windows protected against forced entry?
- Could you keep keys secure in a key Safe (a code-locked box on the outer wall containing a door key? This is accessible only to those given the code.
- How is rubbish put out?
- Can the person get around the house easily if they use aids such as a stick or a wheeled frame? Attaching a basket or tray to a walking frame can be very helpful.
- Is there a lot of junk or clutter blocking access?

Stairs

How easily can the elderly person get upstairs? Are there rails to help them, or would they benefit from a stairlift? (try to anticipate future needs as it can take some time to get a stairlift put in). Are there steps to be negotiated between rooms?

Flooring

Loose mats, frayed carpets, and door thresholds can be a trip hazard – secure them down or take them up

Furniture

Are chairs and bed at a suitable height to enable someone to get in and out with ease?

Heating

Is the heating easily controlled and safe (i.e. beware open fires).

Lighting

With age we often need better light to see clearly and struggle in dim conditions, especially in the middle of the night. Check that lighting is good, and easily turned on and off?

Plug-in and motion-sensing night lights can help but make sure batteries are good, and timings set long enough to allow a person with mobility issues to get to where they are going. Some motion-sensing lights switch off quickly if movement stops which can be very disconcerting.

Anticipate possible fire risks

Including clutter and stacked papers or books. Open fires are not a good choice for people who are frail or have limited mobility. It might, for example, be worth putting in a safer wood burning stove or just resorting to central heating.

Mains switches

Is there a clear note of where these can be found in an emergency?

Telephone

Can the person easily access the phone and use it when they need to? It might be worth considering a "pendant alarm" (worn around the neck) as your relative becomes more frail. Should they fall or have some other crisis, they can press a button on the alarm to call for help.

Kitchen

Kitchen safety is imperative and OT input is particularly helpful. Can the person rest as they need to when preparing food, and then safely get about the kitchen especially when carrying items or hot food? How well do they use their cooker – would a microwave or slow cooker be safer?

Bathroom & toilet

Grab bars next to the toilet or both, or in a shower can help a person lift or steady themselves. Beware loose mats and slippery floors. A properly fixed seat in the shower or bath can also reduce risks and make it easier for a frail person to take the time they need. Check that the hot water is well controlled and not a burns risk.



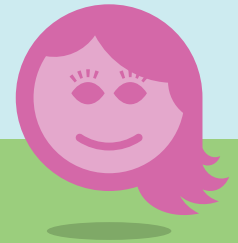
6: Keeping everyone involved

Looking after elderly parents can involve a lot of practical, emotional and financial challenges. Although, ideally, everyone in the family should be involved, it often happens that not everyone is able to or even wants to be involved to the same degree. For example, some members of the family may live much further away than others, or may have very heavy commitments to a job or other issues. And sometimes people just don't get on with each other or with their parents in the same way. As a result, responsibilities can fall more heavily on one family member than another and there may be tensions.

It's critical to keep communications going as well as possible and give everyone a chance to express their views and have their feelings heard. Sometimes it's easier to discuss matters between the rest of the family before bringing the older person into the conversation. This can help avoid burdening them with the details of quarrels and fights but, of course, don't lose sight of the fact that it is the older person's life and well-being that is being discussed and their views should be paramount.

The following tips may help

- There are usually a variety of things that need sorting out so perhaps these jobs could be divided up between siblings, depending on each individual's talents or expertise and availability. Some people feel more comfortable handling technology than others, while others feel their skills lie with managing finances (a task, for example, which could be assigned to someone who lives further away as it can usually be done remotely once systems are set up). Children living closer to elderly parents may be happy to be in charge of the home environment, or cleaning and laundry.
- If grandchildren are around, they too might be roped in to pop in occasionally or give their grandparents a call.
- Change roles occasionally or simply make sure that if one person is doing more of the work of looking after parents, that they get the chance to take regular breaks or holidays. In most areas it's possible to find respite options, to give carers a break.
- If rows break out, take time out to cool off. If necessary, find someone outside the family to mediate.
- When someone is carrying the bulk of care for parents, make sure they are well supported. Contact the local council to first apply for a community care assessment which evaluates the relative's needs. This may result in extra support being provided, or help with adapting the home. The main carer may themselves be entitled to a carer's allowance, especially if they provide care for 35 hours a week or more. They will need to request a carer's assessment, which identifies the help that a person needs to care for their relative properly.
- There are lots of other resources to help carers. The Carers Trust has a national network of carers' centres that can provide all sorts of help and information. Find them at <https://www.carers.org/carers-services/find-your-local-service>



7: Broaching particular concerns or worries, especially with regard to mood or mental health

Some matters cause particular distress for families, or may be especially difficult to sort out. Two of the most common are:

- worries about a parent's mood or mental health
- concerns that a parent is no longer able to live alone or in their current home

These situations are likely to need input from health or social care professionals. But first it's vital to talk to your parent or loved one. Try to explore with them how they are feeling, whether they have particular worries or fears, and what their feelings are about their situation. Depending on their replies you might want to try some simple interventions, such as making sure family visits more regularly, improving their diet or social events, or helping them to tackle other worries on their mind. But if problems persist, or they seem muddled and confused, try to persuade them to seek help. Offer to go with them to see their doctor.

Requests to a doctor for help should always come from the patient (i.e. the elderly person in this instance) themselves. However, if you talk to their GP to express concern, they will be ready to listen to your worries and will then try to find a way to send in one of the team to check if everything is alright. This might, for example, be the community nursing matron who will try to make a call to talk to them.

If you are concerned that an older relative is no longer coping at home, their doctor may again be the best person to approach. They can arrange for an assessment, and may recommend what is known as a "package of care" which will include carers dropping in at intervals during the day to help with aspects of care, from toileting to meals. Further down the line, a move to sheltered accommodation or a care home may be needed. You can also talk to the local social services team, and they will appoint a case manager to explore the problems.



Susan and her sisters have elderly parents, but there is some friction about who cares for them. Susan lives just across the road and while she is keen to do everything she can, she sometimes feels that her sisters only get involved when they disagree with what she is doing. "I know it's a longer journey for them. It takes my sister Kath half an hour to get over here. And I don't mind doing most of the work, popping in to check they are okay every day, getting shopping or doing some cleaning if they need it. But I was starting to feel that Kath and my other sister Claire could at least call more often on the phone just to check how they are, or offer to help a bit more. It was beginning to bug me, but now we started having monthly pow-wows, where we meet up half way between us all in a nice pub. I bring Mum and Dad with me, so they enjoy the get-together, and we set aside half an hour to run through all sorts of things from health to finances. I feel everyone is at least more up to speed on how things are going and what jobs need doing, so it's easier to share those out."



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3rings, visit our website:
www.3rings.co.uk