

## Ask Miriam...

Individuals and families in the community are faced with challenging issues and concerns regarding their social, emotional and psychological health. Through the cooperation of **The Jewish World**, Jewish Family Services will offer responses.

Dear Readers,

I've received inquiries about older adults whose faculties are deteriorating. Many wonder how an adult child determines when and how to take action. Below is one such letter, but I am using the opportunity to expand my answer to try and address some of the other concerns.

Miriam

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### Q. Dear Miriam,

*My mother is living out of town. I've become increasingly concerned over the past six months about my mom. She is not as attentive to her personal care as she used to be. Her eating habits are erratic. She is not taking care of the house like she used to and I suspect not paying her bills in a timely or regular fashion. She is resistant to having anyone come into her home to assist her.*

*My question: At what point do I "take over" and make her accept help or even move her to a living situation where some of these issues will be addressed?*

**Worried Daughter**

### A. Dear Worried Daughter,

There are several components to your question.

Obviously, we must first be concerned about safety. Many confuse physical safety with their reaction to personal cleanliness, sanitation, and nutrition issues. Certainly, if the older person's immediate physical safety is in question, then one must respond. If the older person is endangering another person's immediate physical safety, then one must also act.

An older person is entitled to choose the standards of how she/he will handle cleanliness, etc.

However, if a life threatening physical illness were to result from the conditions of living that the parent has chosen then an adult child needs to act.

Most senior adults do best when they are allowed to remain in their homes. An adult child should choose the most crucial issues to address. Be aware that fixing everything is not likely to be possible. Knowing the personality of one's parent, an adult child needs to use negotiation as much as possible to help the parent keep a sense of control over his/her life. If the parent has lost cognitive functioning to such a degree that there is a fear of dangerous behaviors such as wandering, misusing the stove, etc., then the current living situation may not be viable.

In most situations there is a mix of competence and incompetence. As difficult as it may be, an adult child should look at the areas of incompetence in terms of safety, not aesthetics.

Aging is usually a gradual process. Adult children should not decide on placement in an assisted living or a nursing home at the first signs of loss of abilities. As the parent deteriorates, you may want to put in place, with your parent's permission and involvement, help that addresses some of the issues. Adult children often make the mistake of watching parents deteriorate, taking action only when the crisis arrives.

The key is for children whose parents are still relatively well to enter into a dialogue about what will happen when and if the parent is not okay. This gives the senior adult an opportunity to be part of the planning process and retain some control. Another crucial consideration for adult children is to realize is that what they may see as a solution may not be available. Check first to see if a service is available and affordable before trying to negotiate it with a parent.

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Miriam Adler, A.C.S.W., C.S.W., is assistant director of J.F.S. She answers most frequently asked questions. Please send questions to "Ask Miriam," c/o Jewish Family Services of NENY, 877 Madison Ave., Albany, NY 12208 or e-mail [madler@jfsneny.org](mailto:madler@jfsneny.org) or call 518-482-8856.