

To Your Health

Discuss care with older parents before emergency strikes

By **SHERRI NEFSKY**

Special to The CJN

It is hard to know when it is time to start worrying about the health and wellbeing of aging parents and relatives.

When is forgetting where they put something a cause for concern and when is it simply a lapse? When are changes in their behaviour normal and when are they a signal of bigger issues?

Assessing these matters is hard enough when you live close by. The situation becomes more stressful, however, when you live in a different city. It is easy for things to go unnoticed when you don't get to see each other often.

Sylvia Nathanson, a social worker at Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care, says regular phone calls and visits are the best ways to stay on top of the situation and monitor any changes in mood, habits and behaviour.

Changing the way we cope with aging

By **CYNTHIA GASNER**

Special to The CJN

The aging process can be slowed down, according to personal trainer Beverley Burdeyney.

"There is no old age," she says. "There is only neglect. Regardless of your physical challenges, you can always be your personal best, whatever that level may be."

Burdeyney, 64, has spina bifida and is living proof that her philosophy can lead to good health.

A youthful-looking and energetic grandmother of four, Burdeyney has been working in the Toronto area as an exercise coach for more than 20 years. Her clients are of all ages, many of them over 65.

"It is important to design programs for them that address their physical capabilities. Good health means taking responsibility for yourself – replacing bad habits with good ones. Individuals need mentors," she says.

Burdeyney points to John Glenn as a role model. At age 77, he was the world's oldest

"Memory loss, they are beginning to look frail, the apartment doesn't look as clean, the fridge doesn't look as full – these are all early signs," she says.

Audrey Miller, a social worker and the managing director of Elder Caring Inc., which provides care for seniors in their homes, says that often families don't deal with care decisions until something happens, such as a fall or emergency hospitalization. At that point, decisions are rushed and the elderly patient may have little say in the outcome.

A good time to begin talking to an elderly person about how she or he is coping with living at home may be when everything seems fine, she says.

Nathanson recommends taking an approach that won't put the other person on the defensive. That includes using wording such as "I can see it is getting harder..." and being understanding.

If you are not getting a response, she

astronaut and handled the rigours of his space flight in 1998 as well as astronauts half his age.

Research indicates that walking or cycling for at least 20 minutes, three times a week, reduces the risk of death from cardiovascular disease and all other causes in men over 64, she says.

"I don't believe that physical activity is the only factor in having a great life. It is a very important part of a much larger equation, which includes sensible nutrition, the three R's – rest, relaxation, relationships – cultivating a sense of joy, remaining active and having a religious component, however one wishes to define it."

Burdeyney says one of her objectives is to help her clients create their own "dynamic central girdle," by strengthening the muscles of pelvis, abdomen and lower back. She compares the pelvis, abdomen and lower back to the foundation of a house. "If the foundation is strong and solid, then the building will



suggests asking family members or friends to drop by or telephone. They may be able to offer added insight into the situation.

Pride and a fear of becoming a burden may keep a parent from dealing with age and health-related issues.

Nathanson says elderly people are sometimes relieved when they get the chance to answer questions truthfully. They might never ask for help themselves, but may open up when approached.

Nathanson suggests addressing issues such as having an up-to-date will and deciding power of attorney while competency is not an issue. That is also the time to discuss how and where an elderly person wants to spend the next few years.

Miller says it is important to try to find out everything you can about government and city services and organizations for the elderly before your parent needs them.

Look also to the local Jewish community and Jewish Child & Family Services. For the challenge of caring for elderly parents who live in different cities, contact national groups such as the Alzheimer's Society.

If an elderly person is living alone, some simple steps can help to make her or his home safer, alleviating the absent child's fears of the parent falling or having an accident. Miller recommends the federal government's *Safe Living Guide*, which is available online. Baycrest Centre has its own publications,

including *Caring for Your Loved One*, for caregivers with relatives who have Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia.

Many small things can improve the quality of life for elderly parents who want to be on their own but need a little help. Meals-on-wheels or day programs at community centres can keep them active and healthy. Arranging for help with cleaning, repairs and errands can make a difference, especially in the winter. Even making arrangements for them to pay their bills can ease your worries.

You may think your parent should come and live with you or move to the city you call home, but that does not mean he or she will agree. "Moving is hard when you are young. It is harder later on," says Nathanson. Your parent may be unwilling to leave a lifetime of friendships and memories.

If a parent has lost a spouse or has become more physically dependent, the opposite may be true. That may be the time when a parent wants to be near you.

And of course, whether you and your relative live close together or not, deciding when or if a nursing home is necessary is a difficult emotional decision for everyone involved.

"It is important to respect the wishes of the parent. Respect is an issue. Allow a person to make the decisions they can make," says Miller. "Have them involved and hear what they have to say."

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