



Clues That Help is Needed

By Robyn M. Young

Barbara's mother called in a panic. The electric company had shut off her power. Barbara* called the company and learned that her elderly mother had not paid her bills in several months. Barbara made an emergency trip to her mother's to sort out her affairs. She learned that other utilities had not been paid and last year's tax returns had not been filed. Barbara, who lives in another state, was unaware that her mother's ability to manage her finances had deteriorated.

Some elders reach a point where they need help managing their financial affairs. Fearing the loss of their independence and an invasion of privacy, many do not ask for help. Left unnoticed and unattended, however, financial problems can develop and quickly spiral out of control.

Here are some clues to watch for that may indicate that Mom and Dad need help.

Listen to what your parents say.

Repeated statements that they do not receive any mail, including income checks and bank statements, need to be investigated. While your parents could be victims of fraud, such assertions could also indicate that Mom or Dad's cognitive abilities are declining.

Talk of unusual or large expenses, new expensive hobbies, or "can't fail" investments could also signal problems. While everyone has a right to purchase what they need and want, such purchases could indicate a problem if they are more than what your parents can afford or are out of character. If Dad never had any interest in fishing and is suddenly buying expensive gear and planning an Alaskan fishing trip, he could be having difficulty managing his finances.

Visit your parents at their house.

Look at the state of the mail. Piles of mail scattered around the house or mail in unusual places - such as stuffed into books - could mean that Dad is not paying attention to his financial affairs. Take some time to flip through the mail. Undeposited checks and unopened bills, statements and letters are all warning signs. If an unopened letter looks official, ask Dad's

permission to open it. While it could be junk, it could also be a notice from a collection agency.

Ask permission to look at Mom's checkbook register. Repeated or missing check numbers, incorrect balances, and missing deposits are all clues that Mom may no longer be able to keep track of her cash flow. Other signs of trouble include a lack of regular payments to utility companies and checks repeatedly written to individuals and organizations that you don't recognize. If you are unfamiliar with the payee, ask Mom what the payment is for. You will want to find out whether someone is taking advantage of her.

Look at how your parents are managing physically.

If her arthritic hands make it difficult to write or her eyesight is failing, Mom may no longer be physically able to pay her bills and keep up her checkbook. If Dad can no longer drive or has difficulty walking, how does he get to the bank?

What can you do if you believe your parents need help managing their finances? Begin with communication. Express your concerns and why you have them. It is important to remember that many people do not like to

discuss their money with others, especially their children. Respect that your parents are adults. The goal is to help them be as independent as possible, not to take control of their money. Legally, you cannot force your parents to do anything unless they are found incompetent by a court of law.

If you firmly believe that your parents need help and they refuse, seek the support of a professional. Sometimes people will respond if their physician, attorney, accountant or investment advisor, whom they know and trust, tells them to accept help. Geriatric care managers can evaluate Mom and Dad's situation and determine what type of assistance they need.

Even if your parents currently do not need help, talk with them now to decide how their finances will be handled should they ever need assistance.

Talking to parents about their money is difficult for most people. It is essential for children to intervene, however, when their parents are losing the ability to manage their finances. By paying attention to clues, you will know when it's time to step in.

**The names of the individuals in this article have been changed to protect their privacy.*