

Baby Boomers *Interact* With Aging Parents



Watching parents grow older can be an emotional drain on adult children. This is especially difficult for those who still want to see their mother and father as vibrant, active, middle-aged individuals.

“Parent aging is often a psychological wake-up call for baby boomers as it reminds them that they too are aging,” says Timothy Schwab, M.D., chief medical officer of SCAN Health Plan. “It’s the time when boomers first see their children start on a life path of their own and are dealing with the reality that their parents are no longer as physically or mentally as sharp as they once were.”

According to Dr. Schwab, it is not only important that adult children recognize and appreciate these changes, but they need to ask themselves “how can I help my parents remain strong and independent for as long as possible?”

Here are ten things adult children should keep in mind as they interact with their aging parents:

1. Over half of all people over 65 experience some hearing loss. If that’s happening to your parents, try speaking in a slightly louder tone (but don’t shout) and in a lower pitch, since high frequency sounds become harder to hear. Be careful to not drop off sounds at the end of a sentence and make sure you face your parent directly when speaking so they can see your lips and gestures.
2. Older adults should have a complete eye exam every 1-2 years. Speak with your parents regularly about their eyesight. If their sight is beginning to worsen, encourage them to try prescription reading glasses, large-print reading materials or magnifying aids.
3. More than one third of adults aged 65 years or older fall each year. If balance or strength is fading, make sure your parents tell their doctor and, if necessary, get the right kind of cane, walker or wheelchair. Also check their house for tripping hazards such as loose rugs or poorly placed extension cords and install grab bars and non-slip rubber mats in the tub or shower.
4. Arthritis can be managed. A doctor’s treatment plan may include a combination of medication, weight management, range of motion exercises, and any number of methods to protect their joints from further damage. If your parents have trouble handling household items, adaptive equipment -- such as wide holders for toothbrushes and pens and easier tops for pill containers -- can be helpful.
5. Changing patterns in eating or sleeping -- or a loss of interest in activities that once brought pleasure -- can be signs of depres-

sion. Be sure to have these symptoms evaluated by your parent’s physician.

6. Older people may continue to be very sharp mentally, but may have less ability to hold a lot of information in their minds at one time. For that reason it’s a good idea to limit your statements to one idea at a time and to avoid jargon or technical terms (such as computer speak), which may be common to your generation but foreign to theirs. When your parent is talking, be patient and don’t interrupt. The first thing said may not be the most important thing on their mind, and once interrupted they may not return to the pressing issue.
7. Minor memory loss is normal. If your parent is dealing with some memory loss, keep questions simple and avoid multiple choices. Politely ask them to repeat back to you important information so you know that it has not only been heard, but has been understood as well. If you feel they have more than minor forgetfulness, make sure their doctor knows and can evaluate them further if necessary.
8. Alzheimer’s disease or dementia both lead to a gradual decline in performing daily activities. If this is the case, children can help develop a familiar routine for their loved one, planning these routines around the times of the day when the parent is less confused or more cooperative. Caring for a person with Alzheimer’s disease can become overwhelming, so find a support group where you can share your feelings and learn more about caring for a parent in this state.
9. There are caregiver options. Discuss with your parents and siblings your parents’ caregiving needs. Find ways for each family member to provide support, and don’t be shy about involving a geriatric care manager, clergy member or family counselor when their participation would be helpful.
10. It is important to have physicians with whom your parents are comfortable with and trust. It is also important to have a health plan that will best support your parent by providing health management programs and practical support services that don’t drain the family financially and allow your parents to remain independent and in their own home as long as possible.