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Visiting Aging Parents This Holiday Season? A Practical Guide for Assessing How They're Doing From Aging Solutions, the Eldercare Experts

(San Rafael, CA) — Heading home to see family and friends remains one of the best parts of holiday season—even with the hassle of crowded airports. But for increasing numbers of adult children whose parents are aging into their 70s, 80s, and beyond, the voyage home for Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Hanukkah can also evoke sadness, worry, and apprehension: Are Mom and Dad still doing okay on their own? What will I do if they're not?

According to Terri Abelar, founder and CEO of Aging Solutions, Inc., a geriatric care consulting and management firm in San Rafael, California, adult children at this time of the year may find themselves shocked, dismayed, and stressed when they visit older parents, especially after a long absence.

Mom may seem more unsteady on her feet. Dad may seem to be forgetting a lot more—and his driving skills less precise. The house may appear less clean and more disorganized. With their own busy lives and careers to manage, adult children frequently return from holiday celebrations even more tense and overwhelmed than when they left.

Aging Solutions offers these guidelines, based on 20 years of hands-on help to families, for adult children planning a potentially stressful visit home.

First, resist the instinct to jump in with both feet immediately to solve every problem you think your parents are having.

“Holidays are rarely the time for taking drastic action, and anyway, the physical or mental decline of a parent is a touchy subject,” Terri advises. “You may be told, loudly, that it’s none of your business how they’re doing. That kind of conflict can ruin the holiday for everyone in the house.”

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Terri says adult children will better serve their families by enjoying the holidays while quietly observing some key areas:

- **Look for any changes in your parents' ability to carry out simple daily tasks**, such as brushing their teeth, taking out the garbage, or putting away dishes. Do they perform these routine tasks with more effort or less regularly?
- Is **old food** piling up in the refrigerator?
- **Do your parents walk through the house freely**, or are they touching furniture and walls to navigate? If so, they may be having balance problems.
- **Observe—or ask—which medications your parents are taking** and see if they are doing so methodically or haphazardly. Medication conflicts and overmedication have become epidemic among seniors. When Aging Solutions clients describe sudden changes in a parent's behavior, memory, speech patterns, or balance, our first suspect is a medication conflict or overmedication. Fortunately, once identified and addressed by a professional, a parent's functional problems can be resolved in a few days.
- **To drive or not to drive**—that is the most frequently mentioned concern when adult children go home. If it is clear that a parent poses a driving danger you'll want to deal with that without delay. But understand also that taking away the independence that an automobile represents will be a battle. If you don't want to be the bad guy who takes away the keys—and someone will have to be—find outside help such as a doctor or family friend.
- **Really listen to what your parents say and how they say it.** This kind of listening means not tuning them out, or cross-examining them because you're worried, or imposing your own expectations.

Specifically, listen for vague phrases or clichés—such as “Oh, you know, same as ever,” or “Can't complain, I guess”—that signal resignation or passive acceptance, and are repeated regardless of context. Sometimes people with diminishing mental faculties use this verbal technique, called masking, to hide their increasing confusion. If they are confused, that's a problem you need to know about—although again, the holidays aren't the best time to confront it.

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- **Pause.** Pause to give yourself a break and to tell yourself not to panic if what you see at home over the holidays alarms you. Remind yourself that when you get home, you'll begin to carve out a long-term plan with the help of siblings and others. If the problems appear too numerous and complex, consider help from a reputable, experienced geriatric-care manager or consultant, who can bring objectivity, specialized knowledge, and practical tools to help your parents and your whole family.

About Aging Solutions

Aging Solutions is a fee-based geriatric care consulting and management small business based in Marin County. The company has helped hundreds of families manage and plan the care of aging relatives, with a strong emphasis on advocacy for elderly clients, high ethical standards, and a fierce resistance to elder abuse and financial exploitation. Aging Solutions follows an innovative Client Centered care management model, an increasingly validated approach that maximizes the use of existing community resources and minimizes unnecessary use of already strained health care systems. Aging Solutions does not provide in-home personal services.

About Terri Abelar

Since 1988, Aging Solutions' founder and CEO Terri Abelar has been one of California's leading consumer advocates helping older Americans. She has designed or helped design many pioneering programs and services for seniors, and has testified before legislative committees in Sacramento and Washington.

Terri previously was a social services supervisor at the [Riverside County Office on Aging](#), where she specialized in elder abuse prevention, and helped develop [The C.A.R.E. Program](#) for interagency partnerships that in its first years, saved taxpayers millions of dollars. Earlier, as part of California's insurance advocacy program for seniors, [HICAP](#), Terri counseled and fought for seniors seeking benefits denied to them by managed care health corporations, and helped those baffled by [Medicare's](#) ever-changing policies and rules.

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