

# HELPING YOUR OLDER PARENT REMAIN AT HOME



**ARE ONE OR BOTH OF YOUR PARENTS** finding it more difficult to manage daily tasks in the home? Do you worry about the health and safety of a parent living alone?

As abilities diminish as part of the normal aging process, families and other caregivers must often help the older person obtain the assistance needed to maintain independence and live safely at home. An occupational therapist works with the person and family to ensure that recommendations to increase independence and safety are specific to their wants and needs, skills, environment, budget, and other criteria. The following tips come from occupational therapy practitioners who work with families to help older adults stay in their homes.

**If you want to:**

**Consider these activity tips:**

**An occupational therapy practitioner offers expertise to:**

Determine whether your parent is safe living at home.

Ideally, talk about living arrangements *before* safety issues become paramount, and encourage your parent to share concerns. Emphasize that having difficulties does not have to mean leaving one's home. Watch for clues that certain daily activities have become too difficult because of physical or mental changes. Are bills going unpaid? Is your parent neglecting grooming or skipping meals? Does the home appear neglected?

Provide an evaluation in your parent's home to assess skills, abilities, and safety, and make recommendations that meet the needs of your parent and other family members. An occupational therapist will also evaluate your parent's ability to get around in the community to get groceries, go to doctor appointments, attend religious services, participate in social activities, etc., and provide options for doing so.

Provide your parent with assistance without being too intrusive.

Focus on your concerns, not on your parent's possible deficits ("I worry about you falling on those dark basement stairs. As a birthday gift, we are going to make sure your stairs are safe and well lit").  
 Introduce small modifications as gifts or services when you notice a need (e.g., when replacing hard-to-reach light bulbs, upgrade the wattage for improved visibility, hire professionals for regular cleaning and lawn care, arrange to have a weekly meal delivered from your parent's favorite restaurant, etc.).  
 Emphasize that helping your parent is not a chore, but that you are happy to be able to assist.

Suggest ways to approach this topic while respecting your parent's autonomy. Occupational therapists can recommend simple to complex home modifications, community support groups, options for getting around in the community, and other services that will help your parent continue to do valued activities safely and easily. Evaluate how well your parent is able to do the things he or she wants and needs to do, and provide personalized recommendations to increase safety, ease, and ability now and in the future. Suggestions may include adding adaptive equipment such as grab bars or stair lifts, lowering counter heights, adding railings, replacing door knobs with lever style handles, widening doorways, etc.

Modify your parent's home on a limited budget.

Explore community-based groups, such as Rebuilding Together, whose volunteers help repair and modify homes for those who can't afford to do so.

Suggest low-cost equipment and other changes (e.g., increase wattage or change the type of fixture for better lighting or reduced glare, use a reacher to avoid bending over or standing on a stool, use the microwave and not the stove to reduce fire hazards, etc.). An occupational therapist will also provide training on adaptive equipment and address any concerns to be sure it will be used.

## Need More Information?

If you are interested in having an occupational therapist help your parents stay in their home, ask the physician for a referral. You can also contact an occupational therapist in private practice who specializes in home modifications (these individuals may have CAPS or SCEM among their credentials).

If your parent has had a recent medical change and qualifies for home health services, a home health agency will be able to provide an occupational therapist. Some Area Agencies on Aging also employ occupational therapy practitioners to address aging in one's home.

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Occupational therapy is a skilled health, rehabilitation, and educational service that helps people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations).

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