# Independent Living

Many elders want to continue living independently in their own homes but need some level of assistance. Independent living can work well for all concerned, once appropriate support has been defined and put in place.

**Determining What is Needed for Independent Living**

Although it may be clear that the older people in your life need some assistance, it's important not to make hasty assumptions. Talk with them about their needs, while understanding that they may be reluctant to admit the need for help. Make it clear that you will respect and support their choices.

**Listen to the older person's ideas.** He or she will know where the real difficulties lie and may be able to tell you what is needed. Ask about specific current or potential challenges. For example:

- House cleaning and maintenance
- Transportation
- Shopping and food preparation
- Bill paying and banking
- Personal care
- Medical care

**Be patient and positive.** Support the older adult's desire for independence. Avoid criticism if some ideas are rejected. Remember it can take time for an older adult to accept help.

**Check for home safety.** Reduced vision, hearing and mobility can all affect an older adult's safety in the home and outside. Involve the older adult in checking for potential dangers. Discuss what can be done to increase safety.

**Inside:**

- Is there adequate lighting generally and particularly around entrances, stairways and food preparation areas?
- Are there rugs or loose carpeting that could cause falls?
- Does the older adult need stair rails or bath rails?
- Does the bathtub or shower have a non-slip base or mat?
- Are cables and wires tucked away safely?
- Is there a smoke alarm and a carbon monoxide detector? Are they in good working order?
- Does your older relative know what to do in case of fire?
- Is there a phone by the bed and an emergency flashlight?
- Is a clear list of emergency numbers kept permanently by each phone?

**Outside:**

- Are external entrances, steps and paths well lit and in good condition?
- Is there a working doorbell?
- Are steps and paths kept free of snow, ice or leaves?
- Is the entrance kept clear of all obstruction, including shrubbery?

**Assisting with assistive devices.** Depending on the level of need, a health provider may recommend the use of assistive devices or suggest changes or minor renovations to the home. These may range from ramps and lifts to wheelchairs, walkers and scooters, kitchen or bathroom accessories and simple personal care tools such as dressing sticks and shoe horns.

- Try to arrange a proper in-home assessment from a professional therapist.
- Check with the therapist before purchasing expensive medical store or catalogue gadgets. Simple, less expensive alternatives are often available from regular stores.
- Before purchasing expensive items like wheelchairs, try to arrange a short-term rental. This will help the older adult decide if he or she has made the right choice.
- Discuss available financial assistance with the older adult. If necessary, fill in forms and follow up to ensure the older adult is taking advantage of all the financial help that is available.

**Prepare for emergencies.** Making plans for emergencies can give everyone involved greater peace of mind.

- Consider an emergency response service. These provide a small alarm that the older adult can wear on a chain and use to summon urgent professional help in a crisis.
- Additional phone extensions or a cordless model can ensure the older adult always has a phone within easy reach.
- Make sure there is an easily accessible and clear list of emergency numbers by each phone.
- Provide the numbers of back-up family members and friends, in case you can't be reached.
- Make sure that you or another family member check in each day with the older adult.
- If possible, ask a close neighbour to keep an eye out for problems. Make sure the neighbour knows how to contact you and has other emergency numbers.

Though the stages of aging can bring some difficult moments, by understanding what you and your elderly relative are experiencing, and some of the options for supporting them to continue to live independently, you are helping them grow old gracefully. By maintaining a relationship of clear and open communication, keeping an eye out for your aging relative’s safety, and supporting them in their choices as best you can, you make it possible for them to maintain their independence and safety as long as possible.