

MAKE IT SAFE!

A Family Caregiver's Home Safety Assessment Guide for  
Supporting Elders@Home



RAE A. STONEHOUSE



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### **Live For Excellence Productions**

1221 Velrose Drive

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Canada V1X6R7

<https://liveforexcellence.com>



SECTION ONE :  
ELDERCARE@HOME OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION



It is often said "it takes a village to raise a child."

**I**The same can be said about helping an elder age at home.

Perhaps not a village, but certainly a family.

With advancements in modern medicine, our aging population, on the whole, is living longer.

While many elders are living longer, they are not necessarily living better. Many are living with complex chronic medical conditions, requiring ongoing monitoring and support.

Those who would've succumbed to acute or chronic diseases and ailments in the past are continuing to live longer lives due to the benefits of ongoing medication.

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We can't generalize or lump all seniors or elderly people into a one-size-fits-all category. Many seniors remain active, vibrant and mentally alert into their 90s. Yet, others seem old in their early 60s.

Caregiving at home has proven its value in offsetting the high costs of in-facility healthcare, and at the same time, improving the quality of life for many elders. However, educational training and support for caregivers has been in short supply.

Traditionally, in many cultures, the role of caring for and supporting aging parents has fallen to an unmarried daughter.

The caregiving role has changed over the years with many men stepping into the role. There is a current trend of younger people in their late teens and early 20s taking on the caretaking role for their parents who may be aging or suffering from chronic illnesses.

Taking on the role of supporting an elder living independently in the community or living with your family in your home can be an immense and daunting responsibility.

Our formal education and training haven't prepared us to take on the role of caregiver. So how do we do it?

The focus of this book is to help you as a family caregiver create a safe living space and conditions to support an elder living semi-independently in the community or adapting your family household to support an elder as a member of your family.

**Make it Safe! A Family Caregivers Home Safety**

**Assessment Guide for Supporting Elders@Home** started as a module focusing on elderly safety in the **Elder@Home Awareness Program** which I had been contracted as a consultant to create for a local non-profit organization.

As a recently retired Registered Nurse of over 40 years, I have worked predominantly in the field of mental health/psychiatry. I have experience working with the elderly in senior's facilities, psychogeriatric units, mental health facilities and in the community.

Over the years I've taught various healthcare programs to adults in post-secondary school settings.

While working as a Registered Nurse I have been actively involved with Occupational Health & Safety in my workplaces. That experience has been beneficial in developing my skills to take an analytical look at a home's potential safety hazards and to provide strategies to rectify those hazards to make it safe for an elder to live there.

As an aside, in developing this safety program, it has created a massive To Do list of items I need to complete in my own home as my wife and I hope to age in place.

As an author and creator of several self-help books and on-line courses, I take a systematic approach to exploring a specific subject.

We begin with an overview of home safety. We look at a method of completing an assessment of the home's safety status and develop strategies to rectify the problems or hazards to make the home safe.

There is a lot of information on the Internet right now about how to make the home safe for an elder. The information provided can be well meaning, yet falls short of providing the rationale behind their safety tip or considerations you might need to make before deciding on your course of action.

**Make it Safe! A Family Caregivers Home Safety Assessment Guide for Supporting Elders@Home** is a compilation of readily available safety tips, adds to them and takes them to the next level.

This is a book meant to be read, and then put into action. A download-able home safety inspection sheet is provided so you can complete an elder's home inspection, or yours for that matter.

There is also a companion workbook to this book entitled **Make it Safe! A Family Caregivers Home Safety Assessment Guide for Supporting Elders@Home - Companion Workbook** available that may make your task a little easier.

**Note:** Links to additional resources and sources of the content have been included throughout the book. Websites tend to change frequently and the link that worked when the book was published, may no longer work. If you find a link that doesn't work, I would suggest copying the url link and pasting it into a Google search bar. In most cases it should provide you access to the resource. Sorry for the inconvenience.

After our introduction of home safety concerns, we move on to an overview of general home safety matters. We systematically work our way through the home, focusing on

specific rooms or areas where we are provided with **Safety Assessment Questions** to answer.

Many of the safety assessment questions are accompanied by **Considerations** to help you decide your course of action as well as the **Rationale** behind the question. That is, why is it important and why do you need to care about this potential problem. Each question is backed up with **Action Items** to suggest what you can or need to do to solve the problem and make it safe for you, your family and the elder.

Throughout the book I have provided **[Author's Comments]** sharing anecdotes from my personal experience to illustrate various points. In addition, I've included **Make it Safe TIPS** to draw attention to important suggestions.

After we work our way through the home, we look at three chapters focusing on electrical safety, fire safety and home use of medical devices. We complete this section on home safety by looking at elderly driving concerns and providing guidance for ongoing support and follow-up for your aging at home elder.

In our final section, Section Three, we look at maintaining your elder's health and wellbeing as they successfully age at home. This is your ongoing follow-up stage.

We also look at day-to-day healthcare supervision, medication management safety, emergency preparedness and finish with an exploration of scams targeting the elderly.

We start our eldercare safety journey in the next chapter looking at an overview of the Caregiver role.

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Rae A. Stonehouse, Author

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## OVERVIEW OF THE FAMILY CAREGIVER ROLE



### **he Caregiving Journey**

**T**In Canada alone, more than eight million people—or 28% of the population aged 15 and over—provide care to older adult

family members or friends, and the numbers will continue to climb as the proportion of older adults continues to rise. Eighty percent of older adults and people with long-term health issues are cared for at home by family and friends.

CAREGIVING IS ONE OF THE GREATEST GIFTS WE CAN PROVIDE A loved one and can also be a very rewarding experience. But it can also involve many challenges to the health, well-being and financial security of caregivers.

As a caregiver, it is important to talk to family, friends, other caregivers and professionals to share information and find out about local supports and services. Accept offers of help and

arrange for respite whenever and however you can. While caring for a loved one may be a top priority for you, it is also important to take care of your own health and well-being.

**Source: McMaster Optimal Aging Portal** <https://www.mcmasteroptimalaging.org/hitting-the-headlines/detail/hitting-the-headlines/2019/04/02/the-rewards-and-challenges-that-come-with-caregiving>

The caregiving journey can look different for everyone. Perhaps a few months after a loved one has had surgical procedure, or caregiving can be a role somebody takes on for several years supporting their loved one who has chronic conditions. It can even last decades for someone who cares for a loved one with Parkinson's or some type of dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease.

## DETERMINING WHEN A CARE CHANGE IS NEEDED



**A** challenge many families experience is deciding when an elderly family member or loved one requires a change in their living accommodations.

There are two general categories: How to know when it is time to transition from independence in the home and when it is time to move from home to a care facility.

### **Independence to Support in the**

#### **Home: Mental:**

- Forgetfulness that impacts daily life
- Accidents in the kitchen such as the stove being left on e.g. scorched pots and pans
- Losing track of medications
- Missing doctor's appointments and social engagements
- Mail and bills are piling up

#### **Emotional and Social:**

- Reluctance to leave the house (might be due to cognitive impairment, mobility limitations or transportation issues.)
- Withdrawing from social interactions (might be a sign of depression)

#### **Physical and Medical:**

- Losing interest in meals or cooking. Could be medical issues like arthritis that are preventing them from cooking.
- Declining driving skills

- Declining personal hygiene. Perhaps they are afraid of using the bathtub or showering due to a fear of falling.
- If they always had a clean and tidy home and now it is unkempt, it may be a sign something else is going on.

### **Home to Facility:**

It can be a difficult decision to make. Some adult children have promised their parent they will never move them to a facility, then they are challenged to follow through on that promise.

Here are some general indicators to determine when it is time to move from a home to a facility setting or a community setting:

- Refusal to accept professional help at home
- Care needs are beyond level of care available in the home. Maybe they have a medical condition, or the layout of the home is not conducive to their safety or the home environment can't be modified to meet their needs.
- For those with dementia or Alzheimer's, if behavioral symptoms are too much to manage at home. The disease symptoms could put the caregiver or the care recipient in danger.
- Cost for 24-hour care in the home is outside of financial ability to pay for services. Even if a family creates a schedule and supplements with outside help, it may be more financially feasible to consider moving them into a care facility.

Every situation is different, and this list doesn't cover all situations. The decision should involve the elder and any family member who wants to be part of the decision-making process.



IN OUR NEXT SECTION, SECTION TWO, WE LOOK AT ASSESSING safety hazards in different areas of the elder's home or living accommodations.

## SECTION TWO: HOMESAFETY

### HOME SAFETY OVERVIEW



**I**f you are a parent, you will probably remember what it was like to make your home safe for your children.

MANY OF THE SAME PRINCIPLES APPLY WHEN MAKING YOUR HOME safe for elders. Whereas, with children you are usually protecting them from accessing something that could be hazardous and could cause them harm, when making the home safe for elders, you will also be thinking about accessibility, accommodating decreased mobility and memory deficits.

At the same time, you need to be able to support the elder in maintaining their independence as long as you can and as long as they are able.

IN THIS SECTION WE LOOK AT MAKING YOUR HOME SAFER FOR AN elder to reside with you or

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making adaptations to the elder's current home, allowing them to live independently, with your support.

Throughout the book I use the terms 'elder', 'senior' and 'loved one' interchangeably. While this book is written from the perspective of helping an older person to live safely either independently or semi- independently in their own home, or yours, the same safety principles apply to caring for someone who is not elderly.

To do so, we will be drawing from the field of personal safety as a way to organize ourselves.

### **INTRODUCING THE 3 AS OF PERSONAL SAFETY... AWARENESS, Assessment and Action.**

**Awareness:** As we go about the activities of our daily life, we likely encounter many situations or conditions that are hazardous. Hopefully, we have learned how to avoid or prevent negative results from these hazards.

This is your awareness. You realize a particular situation could be hazardous to you so you take avoidant or corrective actions to prevent harm or injury.

### **THIS SECTION ON HOME SAFETY WILL SERVE TO RAISE YOUR**

awareness on how the safety needs of an elder can be greater than what we may be used to.

I would suspect upon completion of this book you will identify hazards in your home needing rectifying for the benefit of

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your entire family, not just an elderly person as I did when developing this program.

**ASSESSMENT:** AT A BASIC LEVEL, ASSESSMENT IS WHERE YOU WILL

be doing a walk-about inspection of the elder's living environment.

Much the same as a home inspector would do an investigation of a home you were considering purchasing... letting you know what is right or wrong with the house, you will be conducting a safety inspection of the elder's home.

As we work our way through the book, we will be exploring a collection of safety-related questions, focusing on different areas of the home.

The chapters are organized in main areas common to most homes and suggestions are provided to the questions posed.

AS YOU WORK YOUR WAY THROUGH THE CONTENT, YOU WILL NOTICE there are specific hazards common to many areas of the home. They will be identified in the chapter you are reading. To draw attention to their importance, some will have their own specific chapter examples: Fire Safety and Electrical Safety.

If you can think of a safety concern we missed, please let us know so we can share with others.

**HOME SAFETY ASSESSMENT FORM:** I HAVE CREATED A SET OF question sheets you can print and

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carry with you to complete your inspection. You can access them and download them at <https://Book-Hip.com/SXGMBT>.

It can be helpful to use a clipboard when you are performing your safety inspection.

**ACTION: IT DOESN'T HELP ANYBODY IF YOU IDENTIFY A HAZARD**

and don't do anything to resolve it.

Resolving a problem may mean taking a piece of equipment such as a toaster with a faulty cord out of service, repairing a hazard or perhaps undergoing a major renovation to accommodate the elder's needs.

**CREATE A SAFETY UPGRADE BUDGET.**

There are several steps to creating a budget for safety upgrades.

Some fixes you may be able to do fairly quickly. Others may take time to organize and to raise the funds to pay for the upgrades.

Once you identify a safety hazard needing improving, you need to research the options available and determine a cost.

As well, are you able to make the improvements yourself, or will you require a professional tradesperson to make the improvements? This will affect the costs involved in the home improvement.

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While we complete our safety inspection, we will keep track of items that may require a budget to rectify.

Depending on where you live, there may be government or NGO (non-government organizations) funds you could access to offset the costs of home safety improvements.



IN THE NEXT CHAPTER WE START OUR HOME INSPECTION INSIDE THE home. We look in detail at specific hazards and provide commentary on further considerations.

AS WE WORK OUR WAY THROUGH OUR HOME INSPECTION WE ALSO look at safety devices that can be purchased to solve safety problems or to facilitate the elder's continued level of functioning.

PLEASE NOTE WE ARE NOT RECOMMENDING SPECIFIC PRODUCTS AND you should undertake your due dilligence before purchasing any product and putting it into service.

**End of Sample.**