

How to help seniors deal with winter



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Susan Cwieka is the campus executive director at New Pond Village in Walpole. [Submitted photo]

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WALPOLE, MA. (Jan. 30, 2018) - Winter Storm Grayson recently offered an abrupt reminder about the inconveniences of the season, but winter weather can pose especially serious risks for our older neighbors and aging parents. This is true even for seniors who generally thrive while living independently.

While we all may have felt slightly cut off from the outside world during recent snowstorms, for seniors, the isolation and immobilization can mean they miss vital doctor appointments, are unable to visit the pharmacy to refill prescription medications or face increased risk of slip-and-fall injuries if venturing outdoors.

Matters can get worse if older adults take action to dig themselves out. Nearly 70 percent of Americans over the age of 60 have been diagnosed with some form of cardiovascular disease. Cold temperatures can

constrict already narrowed blood vessels and increase the risk for heart attack and stroke if they shovel snow.

What can we do to help our parents and other older loved ones better prepare?

As campus executive director of a Boston-area senior living community, I've spent my career working to ease the challenges faced by older adults. And, as a Massachusetts native, I know how those hurdles can grow during the winter months. Winter Storm Grayson is an important reminder for us to reflect and consider whether our parents are in an environment where they can live as independently – and as happily – as possible. It may not be realistic for those of us with older parents to shovel them out or drive them to appointments every time it snows, but we can help our parents plan ahead – whether that's for the next big snowstorm or for a move providing freedom from home maintenance.

Here are some action steps you can take right away:

- Next time you visit mom's or dad's home, make sure there's an adequate supply of blankets in case the furnace goes out during a cold snap.
- A furnace is a controlled fire inside the home; ensure smoke and carbon monoxide detectors have fresh batteries.
- Check for adequate supplies of rock salt or de-icer so mom or dad can proactively coat outside steps and walkways before freezing temperatures strike.
- For maintenance medications, request a 90-day supply; this may allow your parent to be less likely of getting into a bind if they are unable to get to the pharmacy for a few snowy days.
- If your parent is on dialysis, ask them what their dialysis center's recommendation is during severe weather. Can they provide an at-home dialysis unit in the event of a winter storm?

It's also important to talk with your parent or loved one about whether they still want the responsibilities of maintaining a home. During that talk, be on the lookout for signs that your loved one would have their needs better met by living with others. This is especially important for parents living alone. If that's the case, it's important to empathize with your parent's feelings about maintaining their independence, but to also relay your concern for their well-being and happiness.

If your parent wants to cut down on responsibilities and still maintain an active lifestyle, there are a lot of options. Senior living communities are a good fit for many seniors because they empower residents to enjoy their independence while pursuing their passions and building friendships – while eliminating the burden of having to maintain a home.

Showing mom or dad that they have options is an important step in ensuring that they remain healthy and happy in retirement.

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