

QUESTION: *I am 76 years old and live alone in my own home. I am getting weaker, but I still drive and have an active enough social life that loneliness is not an issue for me. The problem is that keeping up my home is getting harder and harder. I pay a neighborhood boy to do the yardwork, but I am forced to rely on the generosity of neighbors to get certain things done around the house—moving anything moderately heavy, getting up to change the lightbulbs in the ceiling, and all those other chores that are too difficult for me to do on my own, but too trifling to be able to hire someone to come do them. I feel I am becoming too much of a burden on those around me, yet I am not ready to give up living in my own home.*

Response from Stephanie T. Machell, PsyD:

Your situation sounds ideal, enviable even. You are fortunate to have so much support available for you to age in place. We should all have such helpful neighbors!

Of course you wouldn't want to take advantage of their generosity—but are you really doing so? I often hear polio survivors express concerns about being a burden. Because many polio survivors pride themselves on being independent, needing to ask for even modest amounts of help seems to raise this fear. And since anxiety makes it difficult to “read” others' reactions, you may be interpreting your neighbors' neutral or even positive responses as signs that you are asking too much.

As always, the best way to find out is to voice your concerns. Tell them your fears about becoming a burden and ask them to give you honest feedback. Of course, if they tell you they enjoy helping you, you may not believe them. And if they tell you your demands are excessive, or that they would prefer not to do certain things, you may be hurt. Or you may not have the sort of relationship where talking about something so personal would be comfortable.

Another option for figuring out whether you're asking too much is to make a list of all the tasks you've solicited help with over the past few months. Beside each, write the name of the neighbor who helped and how long it took. If you can honestly do so, also note their reactions to being asked—or if they took the initiative and offered assistance.

Once you're finished, read it over. Does it look like you're asking too much of anyone/everyone? Or are you surprised and pleased to discover how little help you really need? Did anyone seem annoyed? Did anyone seem happy to help because it's the “neighborly” thing to do?

If you decide you're uncomfortable relying on your neighbors there are other ways of getting help with small tasks. In Massachusetts, some towns offer tax incentives for those who volunteer such help. High school students may exchange help for community service credits. Some churches offer help even if you don't attend. Your local senior center should know what resources are available.

You can also hire a handyperson—maybe even one of your neighbors! Ask friends or your senior center for recommendations. There are websites for task help, but remember not all do rigorous screening, so be sure to ask for references.



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Whether or not your neighbors view you as a burden, it may be helpful to address your fears of becoming one. Reflecting on this on your own or with the help of trusted others can help you understand where these feelings come from and how you can address them. If you belong to a post-polio support group, this topic is likely to spur lively discussion. However, given that it's a fear many who are aging share, it could be productively discussed in a variety of settings—including over lunch with friends!

Response from Rhoda Olkin, PhD:

How well I know what you are describing! I, too, am aging with polio and finding various activities of daily life more difficult. As people with disabilities, we have to constantly balance our finite portions of energy, money and time. The more we have of any one of these, the less the need for the others. But the converse unfortunately is true as well—the less energy or time we have, the more money we need. Problems arise when we are short on all three.

So, my first question is about money. There are many problems associated with living with polio that money can address. Ordering groceries or even meals online, for example, is a bit more expensive, but saves lots of schlepping. I myself pay someone to come to the house four days a week for about 1–2 hours a day, to do those tasks I cannot do (and there are many, from emptying the dishwasher to doing laundry to changing the sheets to buying more dirt for the garden, etc.). This takes a nice chunk out of my paycheck, so there I have to make trade-offs by conserving money elsewhere. But I am still employed full-time, and can

afford to do this. Not everyone can. But there might be a compromise—can you hire someone two hours per week, and save those tasks for those two hours? If you knew someone would be there one day a week to do all those things you find difficult, could the tasks wait until those two hours? In two hours someone could move furniture, change lightbulbs, bring in heavy items from the car, clean the bathroom, water plants. (In California, I would suggest paying \$15/hour—in less expensive parts of country you might pay less, though you want reliability and loyalty, so it might be worth \$30/week.)

But assume for the moment you simply could not manage that amount of money. There are other options. If you qualify for meals on wheels, you might save energy not shopping and cooking, which would allow you to do other tasks. If you belong to a religious organization, they might have volunteers to help. If you have a particular skill, you could trade your skills with a neighbor in exchange for household tasks. If there is a high school student who wants to go to college, you could offer to write a letter of recommendation in return for his or her help over the school year. You could consider a roommate who would have a reduced rental rate in exchange for tasks. Lastly, consider a smaller residence in a retirement community, where you can get a range of services. Although moving can be impractical, or undesirable, most people who move to a retirement community say they wish they had done so sooner, as life is easier.

None of these choices are easy. Each is a trade-off of one thing for another. Only you can decide which trade-off is worth it to you. ■

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