

Can They Weather the Storm? Battered Economy's Big Bite on Seniors

By Maura Keller

For Ryan Malone, the economy has taken an enormous toll on him as a caregiver. With a fixed expense leaving his mother's account every month, the prospect for growth and the amount of time her funds will last has been cut by upwards of 40%.

Malone, author of *By Families, For Families Guide to Assisted Living*, and his mother are not alone. The US economy is experiencing one of its most dismal periods in recent history. Businesses are worried, consumers are cautious, and investors are downright jittery. What does this mean for seniors and their family caregivers?

According to John Buckles, chief executive officer at Caring Transitions, a Cincinnati-based senior relocation firm, a major concern for many older people has long been outliving their assets. "The economic downturn makes that even more realistic for them to foresee," Buckles says. "Older adults often lack the time needed for the market to correct itself so they can make up their losses."

Many older adults are forced to make significant sacrifices, which can be finan-



cial choices that affect their health (e.g., do I buy groceries and eat or do I pay to have a prescription refilled). Recent news stories indicate many older adults are putting

off doctor appointments, surgeries, follow-up care, on-going treatment of health conditions, and more.

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according to the CDC (Centers for Disease Control), over 80% of older adults have one or more chronic health condition that if left untreated, under-treated or not monitored, will hasten the deterioration of their overall health and longevity," Buckles says.

For many older adults, worrying about finances and how they are going to make ends meet is relentless and mentally taxing. In the end, this anxiety may lead to chronic sleeplessness, depression, and substance abuse.

"And don't forget that for those 85 years of age and older, the Great Depression is more than a page from the history books. It is an event that shaped their lives." Buckles says. "Today's economy is like 'déjà vu' to them. They may be reliving their memories and fears, and manifesting their choices and decisions based on what they previously endured."

Signs of the Times

There are obvious signs of distress that caregivers should watch for as it relates to seniors' response to the economy.

"Adult children need to pay attention to how their loved one is coping with the economy by listening to what they're saying and doing," says Mary Rempfer, vice president and general manager at Home Instead Senior Care. "They should check to see if their senior has enough food in the refrigerator and what kind of food they are purchasing."

Rempfer has one client who loves fresh fruit. "She has now turned to canned fruits, because they are cheaper," Rempfer says. "She recently went to see her physician and realized that the canned fruits are cheaper but not as healthy — she gained five pounds from the last time she had seen him."

Adult children should also check to see if their loved one is keeping their house colder than usual in the winter and hotter than usual in the summer. Limiting medication due to expense is also a big problem. "Pay attention to this with your loved one," Rempfer says. "Limiting medication could very well significantly increase the

cost of care to the client because of adverse affects of not taking the prescribed amount."

Other things to look for include:

- Visible signs of stress and anxiety, such as weight loss, inability to concentrate, and physical illness.
- Expressed concerns about finances, fears about the future and frequent discussions about finances, the economy and their current situation. "Discussions that are focused on their concern about 'what will be left for...' someone other themselves are clues that they may be trying to cut corners in their current lifestyles to ensure that a promised inheritance can be honored to other family members," Buckles says.

Take Action

So, what are some concrete ways caregivers can help Mom and Dad weather the storm?

1. **Start the process early.** "Even if the care recipient is not showing any signs of being in financial trouble, start talking to them about their situation," says Dr. Chip Long, an Arkansas psychologist specializing in working with older adults. He recommends that caregivers open the door to discussions about financial matters. "It is difficult, but it can lay the foundation for an open dialogue on this issue and help head off problems down the road," he says.
2. **Don't be afraid to ask for outside help.** Many retirees have fairly complicated portfolios that can involve a variety of financial resources. "Trying to make sense of these issues can be overwhelming for the care recipient, as well as the caregiver," Long says. For that reason, sometimes it is good to involve an expert who is able to tease through the different levels of the finances and provide some concrete recommendations. "I think this can also help to decrease some of the care recipient's defensiveness with regards to this matter," he says. "I have seen some older adults open up to professionals in a way that they cannot with family members."

4. **Help them establish a workable budget.** "Most seniors are accustomed to being on some type of budget—their generation has been through

a lot and learned to budget at an early age," says Jerri Scarzella, vice president and chief financial officer for the HealthWell Foundation. "Help them to recognize what things are needed, not needed, and neutral."

5. **Explore benefits.** Many seniors mistakenly think they earn too much money or have savings that disqualify them for programs to cut their costs on home taxes, utilities, telephone bills and much more. Even if you were disqualified in the past, check to see if you are eligible. Guidelines change for many programs on an annual basis. To check for eligibility, go to www.benefitscheckup.org, a screening tool set up by the National Council on Aging.
6. **Think local.** Many suburbs and communities offer independent programs to assist seniors and help keep them in their homes. Services may include low-cost snow plowing, home care or health care workers, chore services and more. Investigate local Meals on Wheels programs to see if loved ones are eligible, research nearby community centers and look for entitlement programs that might allow the senior to apply for financial assistance. Also check out religious organizations that might have day programs. A phone call to your city can put you in touch with your programs. ■