

IDENTIFYING TIPPING POINTS IN OLDER ADULTS



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Joy (pseudonym) is 89 years old, lives alone, and values her independence and ability to drive. Her daughter has noticed that she is becoming increasingly more forgetful and is concerned about her mother's safety. Two days later, Joy is found by her daughter sitting in her living room at 4pm in her pajamas confused about the time of day. Joy had no memory of eating any meals but her daughter found a burner on with a skillet of burnt eggs. Has this older adult experienced a tipping point in life?

The term “tipping point” was made popular in 2000 by Malcolm Gladwell’s book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Gladwell, 2000). Over the past 20 years, the term tipping point has been widely used to describe critical changes in complex systems. A caregiving tipping point has been described as “a seemingly abrupt, severe, and absolute change event involving either the older adult, or caregiver(s), or both that indicates a breakdown in the status quo of the caregiving system” (Crist et al. 2019, p. 585). The three attributes of a tipping point can be defined as being abrupt (a critical occurrence that is recognized, in retrospect, as a result of a gradual but significant change), severe (triggering a major change), and absolute (a permanent change in condition). Each attribute carries a set of individual and family decision making to honor autonomy, respect, and safety of an older adult.

Assessment for an impending tipping point (early warning sign) may indicate that an older adult needs additional support for gracefully aging based on their preferences, capacity for living safely, and resources available. A comprehensive geriatric assessment may be the first step in identifying an impending tipping point in addition to interviewing key caregivers in the older adult’s life. Screening measures of mobility and stability, cognition, ability to engage in both function and instrumental activities of daily living, and measures of physical, psychological, social, and spiritual health and wellbeing may uncover specific needs for supportive care. In addition, assessment of an older partner’s caregiving capacity is equally important in preventing an impending older adult and caregiver dyad tipping point. Critical timing of supportive care may mitigate an impending tipping point before an injury or safety incident occurs for an individual or older adult-caregiver dyad (Crist et al., 2019).

Impending tipping points in older adults may include the following changes from the older adult’s baseline functioning:

- Cognitive decline in multiple dimensions that may be subtle and may go unnoticed including forgetfulness, depression, anxiety, misplacing everyday items, getting lost while driving, missing appointments (Wadley et al., 2021)
- Mobility and ambulation: slow gait, increased need for assistive devices, impact on life space (the space where most life activities take place) (Taylor et al., 2019)
- Balance: holding onto people and furniture for balance, bumping into stationary objects (Noohu et al., 2014)
- Multiple sensory deficits that impair communication and decrease the ability to engage in IADLS (Whitson et al., 2018)
- Declines in abilities to manage daily life independently and/or with help of a current caregiver (Wadley et al.):
 - To engage in activities of daily living: hygiene, dressing
 - To get help: making a phone call to engage in instrumental activities of daily living
 - To prepare healthy nutrition and consume appropriate hydration
 - Personal safety including situational awareness and driving
 - To manage health promotion, restoration, and maintenance activities
- Observable indicators of frailty: functional, nutritional, and cognitive status, autonomy, sensory impairment, physical changes (posture changes, weight loss), severe fatigue (Bruyère et al., 2017).

Early identification of impending tipping points provides older adults and their families an opportunity to collaborate with health care providers to build a supportive environment to prevent an actual life changing tipping point and enhance older adults' quality of life.

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