

## Home Health Line Tool

# Signs that a patient or caregiver may be overwhelmed

There are many indicators that occupational therapists look for when it comes to identifying overwhelm or burnout in home health, says Laura Diegel, clinical consulting manager for McBee Associates' episode management team. She provides the following examples and explanations of details that may lead OTs to flag a concern. This could help other care team members catch potential issues, too.

### 1. Inconsistent or vague descriptions of daily routines

If a patient can't clearly describe how they manage bathing, dressing, meals or medications — or they give conflicting answers — it often signals that tasks have become too complex or that they've lost confidence in their abilities, Diegel says. Listen for statements that signal fatigue, a lack of structure in the patient's daily life or issues with planning and organization, such as:

- "I just do what I can."
- "Sometimes I eat... I think."
- "My daughter usually helps... unless she's working."

### 2. Visible signs of task abandonment or unfinished care

There are several notable indicators that tasks are too overwhelming to complete or initiate, Diegel says. During the home walkthrough, look for patterns such as:

- Half-completed hygiene tasks
- Laundry left in the washer/dryer
- Unwashed dishes piling up
- Medications scattered or stored in multiple places
- Equipment set up incorrectly or not used at all

### 3. Emotional cues during conversation

Emotional overload often shows up before functional decline is formally recognized, Diegel says. "Patients may not articulate overwhelm directly, but their emotions tell the story."

Look for:

- Tearfulness, frustration or irritability
- Apologizing frequently for the state of the home
- Statements like "I don't know where to start" or "Everything feels like too much"

### 4. Dependency patterns that don't match the clinical picture

Even when a patient appears physically capable, they may still be relying on caregivers for basic self-care, Diegel notes. "These situations signal an opportunity for OT to rebuild self-efficacy and safe independence," she adds.

Some indicators that a patient is more dependent on help than they may admit include:

- A fear of falling
- Loss of confidence after hospitalization

- Cognitive overload
- Learned helplessness

### 5. Poor medication management systems

Red flags include:

- Confusion about schedules
- Missed doses
- Multiple outdated pill bottles
- Saying, "I just take them when I remember."

### 6. Evidence of decision-making fatigue or cognitive overload

When simple questions require extra time to answer or the patient appears mentally taxed by the intake process, it suggests that everyday problem solving and planning may already be overwhelming, Diegel notes.

### 7. Physical signs of self-care strain

These are often cues that indicate the patient has already been struggling long before admission, Diegel says. They include:

- Poor hygiene
- Unkempt appearance
- Skin issues from improper bathing or continence management
- Disorganized or unsafe bathroom setups

### 8. Caregiver fatigue or breakdown in support

A strained caregiver system usually means the patient receives fragmented or insufficient support, Diegel says. Overwhelm often extends beyond the patient, so caregiver voice and behavior should be assessed, she notes. Some signs are:

- Caregivers answering for the patient
- Signs of frustration, worry or burnout
- Inconsistent availability or conflicting schedules
- Missed appointments or a delayed start of care