

Calling for Help:

A Guide to Emergency Response Systems for Older Adults

Series: Aging in Place Technology. Book 2.

Goals: Which Medical Alert is the right one for the older adult about whom I care?

For: Friends and families of frail seniors who worry about them being alone. And seniors who are looking for ways they can stay safely at home for longer, avoiding the specter of the nursing home.

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What follows is an excerpt from this as yet unpublished book. The excerpt describes some different personas we find useful in terms of thinking about which systems will work best for a specific person.

Personas

(adapted from *Caring from Afar: A Guide to Home Sensor Systems*, by Richard Caro & Mary Hulme)

Persona 1: “Go, Go”. But at risk

This is the person who is very active physically, and mentally alert, but has reached an age where there are significant risk factors that make events like falls or stroke either more likely, or potentially more dangerous, than in someone younger. A good example might be someone with osteoporosis who is at increased risk of suffering a hip fracture if they fall.

The person represented by this persona is generally just fine. The purpose of a personal emergency response system for this persona is really in case adverse events (falls, stroke, heart attack) happen. For this persona, a big function of these systems is to alleviate the anxieties of the friends and family — who worry about the senior, and what happens to that person in between visits and phone calls. Also, often people with this persona will start to get a little nervous about “what would happen if ...”, and then an emergency response system might be a useful solution to reduce those worries.

For this persona, it is very likely that a “go anywhere” emergency response system will be more appropriate than an “at home” system, as the person is likely out and about quite a lot. If the individual likes to go off on walks alone, or otherwise is out and about by him or herself, this type of system would be especially relevant.

Often, someone with this persona will care more about the aesthetics of the product than might someone with one of the more at risk personas. It will be especially important to think about a system that the person is actually likely to wear.

Finally, some of the more concierge-like features of an emergency response system might appeal to someone with this persona, who might see it as useful in more diverse circumstances (eg in case of a roadside emergency) rather than solely as a “medical alert”.

Persona 2: “Slow Go”. Needs some oversight to keep safe.

This is the person who is noticeably starting to slow down. Perhaps they have some early signs of cognitive decline, such as memory lapses. Or perhaps they are physically frail and need a walker to get around. Or have become prone to tripping.

Mostly, these people get along fine. But the risks that something bad might happen in such a persona start to grow progressively as their physical or mental condition declines. In some cases, these individuals would benefit from increased help in the home but cannot afford it (or, can afford it but refuse to consider having “a stranger” in the home).

Older people who have a history of falls or a medical condition that leads to poor balance/coordination or impaired vision fit this persona.

Persona 3: “No Go”. Limitations.

People who fit this persona start to have physically quite constrained lives, spending a lot of time inside the home, and have quite significant physical or cognitive limitations. For these individuals, the conversation starts to turn to whether they are really safe at home. Perhaps they would be better off somewhere where there are full time caregivers to help watch over them.

Persona 4: Needs some care (part time).

This person needs help with the activities of daily living like eating or bathing or dressing. But for this persona, the required care is part time. And there are periods in between when no-one is watching over this person and things might go wrong.

Persona 5: 24/7 care in the home

As people's condition declines, for many there comes a time when they require 24/7 care. For this persona, the individual has chosen to get that care in their home. This person is rarely (never?) alone in the house. And if they need any sort of emergency alert, it most likely should call the 24/7 carer rather than a call center responder or 911 directly.