What to Do When an Older Person Doesn't Answer: A Practical Guide for Carers

When a Call Goes Unanswered

Moments of silence can feel heavy when you are caring for an older relative who lives independently. You call, no one picks up. You ring again. Nothing. Your mind starts to race. Has something happened? Are they okay? These situations are unsettling precisely because they could mean nothing - a missed call, a bath running, a nap - or they could mean something serious.

Knowing what to do in those first few minutes can make all the difference. This guide walks through a calm, step-by-step approach that any carer can follow. It also explains how an alarm for independent seniors can offer reassurance and practical help when distance or time zones make it hard to check in person.

Stay Calm and Check the Basics First

When an older person does not answer, the natural instinct is to panic. But staying calm helps you think clearly. Start with the simple things. Could they be in a part of the house where the phone is out of reach? Are they hard of hearing and simply did not hear the ringtone? Maybe they are in the garden, at a neighbour's house, or running a quick errand.

Wait a few minutes and try again. If you are calling a landline, try a mobile number too. Sometimes a different line gets through when the other is busy or forgotten. If you have a family contact or whanau member who lives closer, ask them to try calling from their phone. A fresh voice can sometimes reach someone who missed your call.

Use Technology to Bridge the Gap

If the second call also goes unanswered, it is time to bring in a bit of technology. Many older adults now carry a wearable device that works as an alarm for independent seniors. These devices are designed for exactly this kind of scenario. They include features such as two way communication, GPS location tracking, and automatic fall detection. An SMS alert can be sent to family contacts when the wearer presses the SOS button, or if a fall is detected and the person does not respond.



The key here is that you do not need to be in the same room to know what is happening. With location sharing enabled, you can see where the person is within their home or outside it. If the device has two way communication, you can speak directly through it and hear back. That can quickly confirm whether the person is simply busy or truly in trouble.

One such system is available at familyr.co.nz. It provides wearable medical alarms that include automatic fall detection, GPS location, SOS alerts, two way voice communication, and no monthly fees for older New Zealanders. While this article does not endorse any single product, understanding what these devices can do helps you assess your own situation.

Have a Response Plan Ready

Every carer should have a response plan before an emergency happens. This does not need to be a formal document. It can be a simple mental checklist or a note on the fridge. The plan should list the people you will call if the older person does not answer. That list might include neighbours, nearby whanau members, and the building manager if they live in an apartment block.

Your response plan should also include a timeline. For example, wait five minutes after the first unanswered call. Then try again. If still no answer after ten minutes, contact a neighbour or nearby family contact. If the neighbour can go knock on the door safely, that is the next best

step. If no one is close by, it may be time to request a welfare check from the local police or a community service.

Keep a list of emergency contacts handy. This includes the older person's doctor, the nearest hospital, and any home care provider they use. Having these numbers ready saves precious time when every minute counts.

When to Call for Help

There is no perfect rule for when to escalate, but a few signs suggest you should not wait. If the person has a known health condition such as diabetes, heart disease, or dementia, a delay in response can be dangerous. If they live alone and you have not heard from them for several hours when they usually check in, that is a reason to act. If you have tried multiple times over different phone numbers and still no answer, it is time to ask for help.

Calling a neighbour first is often the fastest option. A neighbour can knock on the door, look through a window, or check if the car is in the driveway. If the neighbour reports that everything looks normal but no one answers the door, that is a stronger signal that something may be wrong.

If you are using an alarm for independent seniors, the device may already have alerted you or your family contacts. Some devices let you check the person's location and even listen in through two way communication. If the device shows the person is at home and you can hear background noise but no voice, that could indicate a fall or medical event.



What If They Are Fine?

It is worth acknowledging that most of the time, the person is fine. They may have simply been in the shower, mowing the lawn, or taking a nap. That is why a measured approach matters. You do not want to cause unnecessary alarm or waste emergency services time. But you also do not want to ignore a real emergency because you were afraid of overreacting.

One way to balance this is to set up gentle check-in routines. A daily phone call at a set time can become a habit. If the call is missed, you know within a few hours rather than days. Some families use a text message or a quick video call. Others rely on the automatic alerts from a wearable device. The important thing is that everyone knows the plan and agrees on it.

The Role of Family Contacts and Whanau

New Zealand families often have strong networks of whanau and friends who live nearby. These people can be invaluable when the main carer lives far away. Make sure the older person knows who to call in an emergency, and make sure those contacts know they are on the list. A shared calendar or group chat can help coordinate who checks in on which day.

If multiple people are involved, assign one person to be the primary contact for each shift or each day. That way, if a call goes unanswered, the primary contact takes the lead and others do not duplicate efforts. This reduces confusion and ensures someone is always responsible.

Learn From the Experience

Every time you go through this process, you learn something. Maybe the older person forgot to charge their phone. Maybe the ringer was turned off. Maybe they were in a part of the house where the signal was weak. These small lessons help you improve the system for next time.

If you rely on an alarm for independent seniors, check that the device is charged and within range. Test the SOS button periodically. Make sure the GPS location feature is working. Some devices, like those from familyr.co.nz, include automatic fall detection that can trigger an alert even if the person cannot press the button. Knowing these details gives you confidence that the technology will work when you need it most.

Practical Steps for the Next Five Minutes

If you are reading this because it just happened, here is a quick sequence you can follow:



- Wait two minutes and call again using a different number if possible.
- Check the person's location through any device or app you share.
- Contact a neighbour or nearby whanau member to physically check.
- If no one can go in person, call the local police non-emergency line for a welfare check.
- Keep trying the person's phone every ten minutes until you get through.

This order respects the person's privacy and independence while ensuring their safety. Most of the time, you will reach them on the second or third try. But having a plan means you do not freeze when the silence stretches on.

Looking After Yourself Too

Caring for an older person is emotionally demanding. When a call goes unanswered, the worry can stay with you long after they pick up. It helps to talk to someone about it - another family member, a friend, or a support group for carers. You are not alone in feeling this way, and sharing the load makes it lighter.

Technology can never replace human connection, but it can reduce the number of times you have to worry. An alarm for independent seniors gives you a window into their world when you cannot be there in person. Used wisely, it becomes a tool that supports both their independence and your peace of mind.