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How to Communicate with Parents About Aging

Having the talk with parents about aging is one we may dread, but can't avoid when it's no longer safe for them to continue living independently. "The Talk" may be triggered by a health-related event. Mom broke her hip, and the hospital won't let her go home because the only bathroom is on the second floor. Or, it could be simply the culmination of a slow but noticeable decline: Dad's house has become so cluttered you're worried he may have a heart attack, and emergency services won't be able to get to him.

Whatever brought your family to this juncture, the goals are the same. First, to ensure a safe living environment that offers the level of care seniors need today and will need in the future. And, second, to accomplish this without adding to the stress your parents are already experiencing as they are forced to face a difficult transition. That's a tall order for any family, and it often requires an emotionally fraught conversation. Here is how to talk to your parents about aging, and reach the best possible decision together.

Start Early

Don't wait until a health emergency requires an immediate decision. The sooner you start thinking about how to talk to your parents about the situation, the more options you'll have available when the time comes. You can take some of the edge off the talk by selecting a casual setting—drinking iced tea on the back porch—and asking them about their own relatives.

For example, what happened to Grandma after Grandpa died? How did she manage? Didn't Aunt Lucy end up in a senior care facility? Did you ever visit her there? As we age, our memories become increasingly important to us, so think about how to talk to your parents by getting them to tell stories about their loved ones.

Follow up by asking your aging parents if they've thought about what they would do in a similar situation. As long as they're comfortable, keep asking open-ended

questions about what they want, how they see their lives progressing and how they plan to pay for it.

A key tip for how to talk to parents about any stressful topic is to keep your voice and body language at ease, and just listen. If your parents start getting tense, let it go. Assure them that nothing has to be decided today, and that you only want to know so that you can help them continue living on their own terms.

Understand Their Motivations

Just as the medical field has made a science of childhood development, geriatric development is becoming an increasingly important research topic, providing critical insight into what's going on with us mentally, emotionally and physically as we age. For most seniors (those without cognitive issues) the top two priorities are maintaining control and creating a legacy, [according to David Solie](#), a leading geriatric specialist and author of "How to Say it to Seniors: Closing the Communication Gap with Our Elders."

Seniors grapple with the day-to-day reality of losing control as their abilities decline, and often become increasingly adamant about holding on to whatever control they have left. With this insight, talk to your parents about how aging without a plan in place is actually eroding their control. For example, maybe Mom can't climb the stairs anymore so she's limiting herself to living on the first floor. Or Dad routinely forgets to take his medication for congestive heart failure and requires repeated hospitalizations.

Then offer various options to remedy the situation: What if we brought in someone a few times a week to help around the house? What if we retrofitted the house to make it easier to get around? What if you moved into a facility where you could get the medical attention you need?

Your parents may not love the choices offered, but the very fact that they can choose for themselves provides some control that can help reduce the tension and make them more comfortable with whatever decision is made.

Be Patient

Even without cognitive issues, we all start to forget things as we age. So just because Mom agreed to move into a senior housing facility last month doesn't mean

she won't change her mind as the time comes closer. If that happens, don't argue with her. Ask her why she has changed her mind.

Listen to her concerns and look for opportunities to be positive and reassuring. Respond with something like, "I understand that can be intimidating, but have you considered . . . ?" Then offer your help, not your opinion (unless you're asked for it).

Know When to Quit

One of the hardest things we may have to do as adult children is to accept our parents' decisions. As long as they are mentally sound and legally competent, they have the right to live out their lives as they choose. Even if you don't agree with their decision, tell them you respect them and will support their choices. The critical thing is to maintain their trust, and keep them safe while you keep communication open.

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