

Having the Conversation

“Procrastination is the art of keeping up with yesterday.”

There is no doubt family conversations are best when they happen sooner rather than later. The more involved your aging parents can be in the conversations, the better. Try not to wait until there is declining health or a crisis of some kind. The fact is, if you, as the adult child have these conversations on your mind... your parents do, too. And, not moving forward just puts more stress on everyone.

There are numerous common excuses for not getting the conversation started. Your parents' paperwork may be in real disarray and you dread dealing with it. You may feel they have worked their affairs out with an attorney or executor and don't need or want your help. Or, things like money or self sufficiency may not be topics that are ever discussed in your family. You may be concerned about siblings or other family members wanting to get too involved and matters getting out of control. Or, talking about next steps for your parents may just feel too emotional because it makes you feel like their lives are ending.

Their lives may be changing, but they are far from over. Give your parents the gift of getting the conversation started. Once the process is underway, parents frequently wish they had begun even sooner. Expect that you will be unsure and uncomfortable raising some of these topics. However, with thought and preparation, even difficult first steps can become more comfortable and result in productive family conversations. Discussions conducted with careful consideration, respect and solid information work best. The right approach and helpful resources can bring about good results for everyone.

APPROACH

Begin with yourself, the adult child, and be honest. Why do you want to have these conversations? What do you want for yourself and for your parents? What are your fears or concerns? What would be your best-case scenario? What do you want to happen?

- *Plan before you have the conversation*
- *Be empathetic.* Put yourself in your parents' shoes. Ask them how they are doing. Ask them if they're still able to do the things they want. Let them know you care about how they are and what they want.
- *Be a good listener.* Sometimes you are afraid to hear what parents are feeling because it also makes you face getting older. Let them talk and let them know you hear them.

The idea that a role reversal takes place in the relationship between you and your parents is neither true nor helpful. That should never happen. A shift in your relationship may occur as you guide these conversations, but you should not consider yourself the disciplinarian or that you “know what is best.”

BEFORE YOU START TALKING

Consider putting together a script or an outline so you have something to follow and don't forget important points. You don't need to have it in front of you, but it will help you organize your thoughts. Be sure to involve everyone in the family who should be part of the conversation and include your parents at every step. Resist any temptation to jump ahead and put a plan together yourself.

Remember when you think about HOW to have your conversation to frame it around the five most important considerations for aging seniors:

1. security
2. freedom
3. peace of mind
4. friends
5. choices.

How can your parents best achieve these things?

Think about asking questions to find out whether or not your concerns are the same as your parents. Let them know what you have identified and ask if they ever think of those same concerns or if they have identified others. Ask yourself if your desired outcomes are the same as theirs. Have they considered the same things you have, or are they thinking in a different direction?

If you still feel nervous or afraid of getting started, run your ideas past a professional. This can be a professional geriatric care manager, a therapist or someone at your church or local hospital. Identify who your parents trust and respect. These can also be excellent individuals with whom to consult.

It helps to have conversations when you are not rushed; when there is time for small talk. Plan to talk in a quiet place where your parents won't have trouble hearing you; where they can feel calm and focus on the conversation. Always show respect and support for the fact that these are THEIR DECISIONS and THEIR LIVES.

GETTING THE CONVERSATION STARTED

There are not necessarily “right” or “wrong” options or ideas. It's most helpful to consider a number of things as good options when starting to have these conversations. It helps to start with small, casual conversations to plant seeds. Use phrases like, “Let's just talk about you,” or “I've noticed some things take a lot more energy these days. What are the important things you really want to

do? What are your priorities? Is there a way we can make it easier for you to do those things?" It has also worked for some adult children to open the conversation by saying how much you admire the way your parents have handled retirement and ask their advice on what has worked well for them so that you can emulate it. This can naturally lead into a discussion about "What kind of planning comes next?"

Others have started conversations by talking about yourself and your kids and how you communicate with one another. Adult children may already be communicating with their kids on their next steps and their wishes surrounding those circumstances. Use something neutral such as a relevant event in the news or a recent incident or anecdote about an aging family member or friend to get the conversation going. This can be an opening to mention, "We've never talked about these kinds of things. I don't want to pry, but it would bring me a lot of peace of mind to know there is a plan if we need one." Build upon these more casual conversations to lead into larger decision-making conversations later.

We hope you will agree that getting the conversation started and getting it started in a good way is a really wonderful gift you can give your parents and your entire family. It is a way to honor your parents and help them look forward .