

Talking to Older Parents about Tough Topics - Their Health, Their Driving, Their Money, Their Death

If it's not easy now, it won't be any easier months or years from now. It is far easier to talk to parents when they're healthy – physically and mentally – than when they're incapacitated or hospitalized. It is just very important to plan ahead. If you wait until you need this information, it's usually too late.

The object of these conversations is to get the information you need so that you can determine what kind of help your parents may need or wish. Since their needs will change, don't look at this as a one-time conversation.

In addition to finding out about what they can do and what they need help with, you'll want to understand what they want out of life, what their biggest concerns are, and what they cherish most.

Here are some general tips:

Discuss when you won't be interrupted and when you are both relaxed. Also, it's best to initiate these conversations when your parents are healthy, rather than when they're sick.

Don't tackle everything in one conversation. These can be emotion-laden conversations, and they're likely to prompt questions that haven't been raised before and hence may require some contemplation. So consider this an ongoing discussion, not one that you only have once.

Ask open-ended questions. Asking, "When you think about the future, what are you most concerned about", is better than "Have you thought about going to a nursing home?" Open-ended questions will yield much more information.

Do not be judgmental. Even if you disagree with the answers you're getting, try to suspend judgment and criticism.

Don't pepper them with questions. If it feels like a quiz, your parents may very likely resent the conversation. Finding ways to let them speak about their needs, plans and wishes works much better.

The direct approach vs. the indirect approach. In some families, it's just fine to get right to the point, and ask, "Have you written a Living Will", or say "I'm worried about your safety when you drive". Other families might do better with an approach that starts with "My lawyer advised me to get a Living Will, what do you think of them?" or talking about a third party – "I see that Mr. Smith moved into an assisted living facility. Do you know anything about them?"

Involve others - if it will help. If you're not getting anywhere, you may want to bring others in, perhaps other family members. Or encourage your parent to talk to their doctor or lawyer. In some cases, it's easier to talk about these matters with an outsider than with a family member.

Be open and clear about the facts. Serious issues of health and safety should be addressed unambiguously. Be straightforward about factual medical prognoses, for example. And be clear if some intervention has become a necessity. You and your parents may not know what to do about those facts, but it's certainly wisest to have everyone be open about them, and start planning with the same baseline information.

Listen carefully to their concerns -- don't just convey your own. Let these conversations be a way to learn how your parent views their life. You can be sure they've been thinking about it, and especially if their health has deteriorated. Some of the topics you might ask about are:

- What are their biggest difficulties in a typical day or week? Is it preparing meals? Is it forgetfulness? Depression?
- What gives them the most satisfaction now? Is it their visits with family, the weekly bridge game with neighbors? What parts of their life do they want to maintain or strengthen?
- What are their biggest worries? Some parents worry about being a burden on their children, some fear a painful death, and some worry that they'll be separated from a spouse who must be moved to a nursing home.
- If someday they decide they can't remain in their own home, where do they wish to live?
- What financial resources do your parents have? This often determines the kinds of living arrangements that are realistic options.
- Have they written wills, living wills and, if so, where are they? Have they made funeral arrangements?

Again, these can be weighty topics, so don't feel you need to get answers to all these questions in one conversation. The Elder Care Planning Checklist, another in this series of brief articles available from Seniors, Inc., is a very good tool to use to assemble the important documents and information you'll want to compile.