

How to Have Tough Conversations with Aging Parents

If you're wondering how to start a discussion with an aging parent about a sensitive topic, you're not alone. But whether you need to talk about moving, giving up driving, or bringing in help, knowing which words to use and to avoid can improve the odds of moving toward solutions.

There are two main types of relationships with your parents. Some of us have an open and straightforward relationship where your ideas and feedback are welcome. And others have parents who are more private and do not want to have difficult discussions with their adult children.

Even if in the past, your parent was sharing and receptive, this can change due to aging-related issues such as depression, creeping dementia, lowered self-esteem, or other frustrations. On the other hand, a close-lipped parent may be relieved to talk because he or she is worried, too.

What to say about sensitive subjects can also be tricky because you have different goals. Geriatric communication expert David Solie, author of *How to Say It to Seniors*, notes that adult children want to solve the problem and move on. Their parents, however, want foremost to maintain a sense of control and dignity in a season marked by many losses. Your goal in how to have "the talk": Balance both sides' needs by moving forward slowly and with care.

Do Some Homework

Before you say a word, take time to collect some information and research possible solutions. Ultimately, the goal is to problem-solve together through a dialogue with your parent (not to dictate the solution or to convince through arguments). But if you gather facts first, you'll be able to help in a way that's better informed and less stressful for everyone.

Check out a few places on your own so you have concrete examples to talk about. Don't think of it as being "sneaky"—it can be less anxiety-provoking for your parent if you talk about the options that you've already researched. This way you are more educated and can review your findings and choices with your parent with tangible information.

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Show Empathy

Demonstrating empathy and understanding of their perspective and doing what you can to help is the key to positive interactions with your older loved one. When starting a difficult conversation, make sure your loved one knows that you're a team and that you're there to work together, not to make sweeping decisions for them.

"Instead of 'I don't know' or 'That's impossible,' try using 'I'll find out' or 'Let me see if I can find a creative solution.' Let your loved one know you are open to their requests will make them feel that you are their advocate for better or worse, rather than another opponent or obstacle.



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