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## HOW TO HAVE *THAT* CONVERSATION WITH AGING PARENTS

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Perhaps you have noticed that your parents don't seem to be able to care for themselves as well as they did in the past. Maybe their house is less well kept than it used to be. Or they have more trouble going up and down the stairs. Or they don't seem to be eating properly.

Over the course of your life you've likely had plenty of emotional conversations with your parents. But few conversations are tougher than talking to them about the fact that they are getting older and may need some help. While difficult, it's a conversation, or series of conversations, you must have—before problems escalate and become a crisis.

Bear in mind that your conversation will probably lead to what your parents will consider dramatic changes that may threaten their independence, even their self esteem. Don't expect your parents to exclaim, "By golly, you're right, thanks for bringing this up." Your parents will need time to accept that they need help and you have to be ready for some resistance.

Here are some tips about how to hold these difficult but necessary conversations.

### **GET EVERYONE IN YOUR FAMILY INVOLVED IN THE CONVERSATION**

Your conversation will lead nowhere if other members of your family don't think there's anything to worry about. Ask your siblings and other close family members if they have noticed any changes regarding your parents' condition or behavior. Chances are they have, and they will want to be involved in the conversation.

A few things to consider before gathering for the conversation include:

- What are the dynamics like between you and your siblings? Which one of you would be the best choice for leading the conversation?
- What types of changes will take place as a result of the conversation?
- What is everyone prepared to do (and not prepared to do) about the situation?
- What goals do you want to obtain by having the conversation?

When speaking with your siblings before holding any conversations with your parents, make sure that everyone has a chance to speak and make their opinions known.

Try to keep the focus on what is in the best interests of your parents. Then, create a list of specific questions and concerns you want to raise with your parents. The questions/concerns should be framed in terms of your parents' safety, freedom, access to friends, freedom, and peace of mind for both your parents and yourselves.

Finally, you may even want to do a trial run of the conversation to make sure everyone is on the same page.

## SHOW RESPECT AND DON'T "TALK DOWN" TO YOUR PARENTS

The tone of your conversation is very important. Your parents may need help, but *they are your parents, not your children*. Respect and humility are a must. Don't try to dominate the conversation. Let your parents talk and make a point of listening closely to exactly what they are saying. Keep an open mind. At this point, there are no right and wrong answers.

## START THE CONVERSATION CASUALLY

This may seem obvious, but the last thing you want to do is start the conversation off by saying something like, "Dad, Mom, we've been talking and we all think it's time you moved to a nursing home."

That's not going to go over very well, to say the least.

Instead, begin more casually. For example, you could say, "We've noticed you seem a little tired lately. Is there anything we can do to help around the house or make things easier for you?"

Or you could begin by talking about someone else who seems to need help, a relative perhaps, or a neighbor, or even a celebrity. As you talk about it, you could say something like, "We've never really talked about this, and we don't want to be presumptuous, but maybe you could use a little help around the house."

Let the conversation evolve.

## ICEBREAKERS COMPLIMENTS OF AARP

AARP offers the following examples for beginning productive conversations with your parents.

***Try not to anticipate what your parents might say or how they will react.***

Example: "Dad, let's talk about what you want down the road. Let's start with what is important to you."

***Express your love and concern—and, most important, listen.***

**Example:** “Mom, have you thought about what you want to do if you need more help?”

***Refer to yourselves and your thoughts.***

**Example:** “We know this is hard, but we’re going to have to do the same thing for ourselves one day.”

***Be straightforward about the facts; don’t hide negative information.***

**Example:** “When you are driving, we’ve noticed your reactions aren’t as quick as they used to be. We’re worried.”

***Phrase your concerns as questions and avoid telling your parents what they should do.***

**Example:** “Mom, do you think you might want a hand with some of the housework?”

***Give your parents room to get angry, but remain calm.***

**Example:** “We understand all of this is really hard to talk about, but it’s important for us to discuss. We love you.”

## **WHAT TO DO IF YOUR PARENTS JUST WON’T TALK ABOUT IT.**

Your parents may simply refuse to take part in the conversation. This will be frustrating, but you must respect their wishes. You should keep trying, however, using different approaches. For example, let’s say one day your father mentions that his eyes have been bothering him again. You could say something like, “I know how much you love to read. Did you talk to the eye doctor about it?” In this way, you are not *holding the conversation*, just talking normally.

Of course, if your parents remain adamant and the situation is putting their safety at risk, you may have to push the issue harder. You might want to speak with your parents’ friends and other members of your extended family to see if they would be willing to participate in a more formal intervention.

You could also investigate what resources are available in your community to help older people remain independent, such as cleaning services, home health care providers, transportation services, food delivery options and the like. Presenting specific solutions that don’t involve major lifestyle changes may be a good way to begin the process of getting your parents the help they need.

