

# HAVING “the talk”

It's the conversation you may be dreading with your elderly parents who need more support than they want to accept.

*Prevention makes it a little easier.*

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● ● ● **YOUR MOM HAS BEEN LEAVING THE STOVE ON AND FORGETTING TO TAKE HER MEDICATIONS.** Your father has had more than a few fender benders of late but refuses to give up driving. Or maybe they aren't steady on their feet but they brush off grab bars as being for *other* old people. Regardless of the circumstances, your parent needs help to stay safe and functional, whether that involves moving into an assisted-living facility, getting an aide, or simply putting

basic safety measures in place. The problem is, whenever you say anything, they resist. You're worried and frustrated, and they're irritated and defensive.

However upsetting this situation is, it's understandable that a parent isn't easily accepting what will likely be a seismic shift. Along with navigating a role reversal as you move into a more parental mode, they may fear losing control, being less independent, and aging in general. They might not be ready to admit things need to change, especially to you.

"When people start losing their independence, the conversations are hard," acknowledges Karen Roberto, Ph.D., a university distinguished professor of human development and family science at Virginia Tech and a core member of the Virginia Tech Center for Gerontology.



These expert strategies have worked for others, so give them a try.

## HAVE "THE TALK" EARLY.

● ● ● Families often have these conversations in times of crisis, says Roberto. But if you can do so before an issue arises, there may be less friction, and it's never too early, says Sue Johansen, executive vice president of the community network of A Place for Mom, a network of U.S. senior living centers and home care providers. "When there aren't issues, you can have a rational discussion without your parent feeling defensive."

Aim to have this conversation at a leisurely pace in a private, comfortable place, Roberto suggests. Bring up the topic in a nonthreatening way, and not at a hectic time. Johansen recommends these conversation starters:

**If you're talking in advance of a crisis:** Say, "Mom, you're doing so well now, but I would love for us to plan for the

future. Let's talk about some situations that may occur and agree on some options to explore. Let's say you couldn't drive any longer—I'd love to see you in an environment that would make your life easier. What might you want in that case?" Later, when you do reach one of these points, you can gently remind them of this conversation rather than telling them what to do.

### **If you've been noticing red flags:**

Have the conversation as soon as you can—for instance, while you're visiting your parents over the holidays. Begin by asking if you can get coffee or lunch together and chat. Then, once you're alone, say: "Dad, I've been seeing some things. You are still doing well but seem to be struggling a bit. I want you to know it doesn't have to be that way. You have options. You're in good shape, and I want you to have the best life you can. Let's talk about what that might look like."

### **If the situation has reached crisis mode:**

Try, "Mom, there are some things I've seen

that really concern me. You forgot to take your medication yesterday, which can be dangerous. We need to talk about what support you need and what I can provide so you can keep your health, because that's the most important thing."

## ENLIST A THIRD PARTY.

● ● ● Consider bringing in someone your parent trusts. When Roberto realized that her mother needed more care, she spoke with her mother's doctor. After strategizing with Roberto, he discussed living and care options with her mom and administered memory testing during her next appointment. Since he'd raised these topics, Roberto was able to continue the conversation with her mother, who ended up moving into assisted living.

The easiest way to establish an open dialogue with your parent's doctor is to get medical



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power of attorney, says Johansen. But if they will not agree to that yet, you can attend one of their appointments and, with them in the room, say, "I'm going to be helping my dad stay on top of his health. We agree that we'll share information so we don't miss anything."

Then the administrator should ask you to fill out a privacy form.

Similarly, if you're concerned that the conversation will be thorny, ask a social worker, therapist, or counselor to mediate, suggests Nancy K. Schlossberg, Ed.D., professor emerita in the

department of counseling and personnel service of the College of Education at the University of Maryland and the author of *Too Young to Be Old*. Another strategy: See if one of your parent's friends can talk with your parent, says Roberto. "They can validate what you're saying or maybe just be there as a friend," she says.

## **HELP THEM REALIZE THEIR TRUE FEELINGS.**

• • • Before beginning the conversation, take a deep breath. You don't want to transfer your stress onto your parent, which may lead them to shut down, so aim to remain calm and to introduce topics (such as concerns about their driving) gradually rather than all at once, suggests Roberto. For instance, instead of "You need to give up your car now," say, "Mom, I've noticed that you aren't driving much or at night. Are you feeling unsure behind the wheel?" If she says yes, you can respond, "If you're feeling nervous at all, it's probably time to limit your driving or stop doing it. Let's get you set up with a rideshare service." Overall, show respect, Schlossberg urges. "It's really important not to be aggressive with your parents—they're still your parents."

Then try to put yourself in your parent's shoes and validate their feelings.

Something like, "Dad, I know you're angry, and you have every right to be. Just know that I love you and I'm here for you!"

## **DON'T TAKE THEIR ANGER PERSONALLY.**

• • • Their emotions likely stem primarily from their feeling of loss of control, and as the messenger, you're bearing the brunt, says Johansen. Especially if your parent has dementia, they may be quick to anger and unequipped to engage in a dialogue the way you'd like them to, she adds. In such cases, bring a sibling, a friend of theirs, or perhaps a trusted clergy member.

## **COLLABORATE, DON'T BOSS.**

• • • "Adult children want to help, but they often do it in a way that takes away from their parent's sovereignty," says Schlossberg. "Some parents worry that if they admit they need help, their kids will take over their life. It's a very

delicate balance that calls for an open discussion," she adds. "Ask them how the two of you should handle it." If they tell you they don't need your help, explain that since you love them, you can't let anything bad happen to them and need to be involved, says Johansen.

## **RESPECT THEIR VALUES.**

• • • Try to zero in on your parent's priorities, says Roberto. If they want to remain in their home and that's not possible, ask why they feel so strongly. Maybe they don't want to leave friends or the vegetable garden they've tended for years. Help them hold on to what's important to them by, say, offering to arrange standing dates with a friend, complete with transportation, or find an assisted-living facility with opportunities for gardening. Emphasize that they might lose some things (like full autonomy and privacy) but gain others (like built-in community, easier daily living, and safety).



## **OFFER A FEW CHOICES.**

● ● ● No adult wants to be told what to do, so lead with options, says Schlossberg. “The more your parent feels trapped by their new circumstances, the harder it will be for them to be happy,” she says. With her mom, Roberto visited two communities, then gave her mother three options: one of those places or an

apartment near Roberto’s home in another state. Since her mom was loath to move far, raising that third possibility sped up her decision. “My mother looked me straight in the eye and chose one of the assisted-living communities,” Roberto recalls.

## **BE PATIENT.**

● ● ● This probably isn’t going to be a one-and-done conversation. “In most cases it’s a process,”

says Roberto. “People need time to think about it, so the earlier you talk, the better.” If you don’t get your parent’s buy-in, just keep bringing up the subject with love until they move closer to where they need to be. Above all, Schlossberg says, try to treat them the way you’ll want to be treated when the time comes for you to have a similar talk with your near and dear.