7 STEPS for SUCCESSFUL CONVERSATIONS with your Parent about Senior Care

A positive plan for the future

People today are living longer than in the past, but that often means they're living longer with the challenges and impairments of aging. Everyone with an aging parent needs to have conversations about the future, and open communication is the most important part of the process. If you understand your parent's hopes and desires for aging, you'll be able to better help them navigate through life's transitions.

Having the conversation may not be easy, but this is a conversation that should take place much sooner than you might think. It's ideal to know your parent or family member's wishes and plans for the future at a time when things are going well for them. Don't wait for a health emergency to occur that will force you into making rushed decisions. Prepare for the conversation with the following steps:

STEP 1: *Make a list of concerns.*

For example, you may be worried about their medication management or their physical safety at home. Write down everything that concerns you. Resist the temptation to jump ahead and put together a plan on your own. Examine your own feelings about your parent's future and prepare to guide the conversation with questions that allow them to express their thoughts, concerns and plans.

STEP 2: *Set up a time to talk.*

Give them a copy of your questions and concerns. This keeps them from feeling blindsided by a tough conversation and helps them start to think about the kind of help they want or need. Get in touch with siblings and any family members so they are aware of the plan to have a conversation with your parents, even if they cannot be present. Their input and collaboration will help you to mutually support each other throughout your parent's aging process.

STEP 3: *Learn about different options.*

As you educate yourself, you'll get ideas about what will best fit your loved ones' needs. Exploring the options will give you the confidence and credibility you need to approach the conversation, but you'll need the partnership and feedback of your parent or family member before making any decisions. Be sure to keep an open mind while you prepare. As you research, you'll find a range of options from in-home care to assisted living to memory care to continuing care, all of which include different types of senior care services. Don't downplay the amount of help your loved one actually needs – it would be a disservice to move them to a community without the proper care.

Open-ended CONVERSATION STARTERS:

"How has it been for you living at home alone? Do you feel safe by yourself?"

"I know you're taking a lot of different medications. Would it help if you had someone to remind you about taking your pills?"

"How do you feel about driving? Have you thought about how you'd get around if you could no longer drive?"

"You've always been so independent that I know it's hard for you to ask for help. But if it were readily available, what could you use help with?

"How well do you think you've been managing your finances and keeping up with paying the bills?"

"Would you feel less stressed if you didn't have to worry about the house and the lawn?"

"You've said you get bored alone in the house all day. Would you like to be around other people your age with similar interests?"

STEP 4: *Sit down to talk in person.*

Not by telephone if possible. Select a time when you are both well-rested and can talk without interruption. Consider that you may need to go to a neutral site, outside of their home, to talk about their house and where they want to live in the future. Remember to use open body language, keeping your hands folded on your lap (not crossed) and shoulders relaxed (not hunched over). Allow your loved one time to get situated and comfortable.



STEP 5: *Ask questions.*

Choosing words that are clear, supportive, non-confrontational and relating to your concerns for your parent. Be respectful and empathetic. Let them know you care about how they are doing, how they feel about their own aging and what they want the rest of their life to be like. Use direct language such as:

"Where would you want to live if you ever decided you would rather not live by yourself anymore?"

"What kinds of things could you use help with?"

"How can we protect you from taking a bad fall?"



STEP 6: *Listen closely to their responses.*

Be prepared for your family member to resist the conversation or dismiss your concerns. Let them know you are their partner in solving a particular need or issue in their life and that you are on their side. Make sure you are hearing their complete answer before offering your opinion or advice. Keep a notebook with detailed notes in order to be able to pick up the conversation at a later time if it gets heated or overly emotional. You may also choose to involve an outside person close to the family, such as an attorney, physician, minister or friend.



STEP 7: *Talk again. And again.*

As nice as it would be to wrap things up in one conversation, the reality is that this will be a process involving multiple discussions. It's best to address one issue at a time rather than trying to resolve everything at once. Unless you have an emergent health issue or safety risk to address with your parent at home, it's okay to take the time needed to develop a mutually agreeable plan by having an ongoing, honest conversation about everything related to your parent's future.

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