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Talking About Touchy Topics With Your Aging Parents.

Guidance for successful conversations

COUNTRY MEADOWS
RETIREMENT COMMUNITIES

Touchy Topics

From childhood into early adulthood, our parents were tasked with caring for our physical, emotional and financial needs. As we matured and grew self-reliant, our parents began to relax their hold on us. We built careers, families and lives of our own. Now, as adult children, we find ourselves assuming a measure of responsibility for the ones who once cared for us. These changing relationships can be uncomfortable, and our elderly parents may feel we're overstepping our bounds. Roles and responsibilities often change, and sometimes it doesn't feel right.

At Country Meadows Retirement Communities, our focus is on caring for aging family members like yours. We understand what you're experiencing and have dealt with these touchy issues for more than 30 years. We prepared this guide to help you through unknown territory by offering positive, productive ways to address these situations.

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let's start with

10 useful tips

for handling the most common and uncomfortable topics affecting older adults such as driving, finances, getting more help at home or moving to a retirement community.

1 | Ask your parents for their ideas; don't tell them what to do.

Inquire as to whether they're having any difficulties. However, you should anticipate a false assurance or vague reply, so be prepared with gentle, probing questions. For example, "Have you thought about how you would get help if you were alone and ever fell down the basement stairs?" Or, "How would you feel if you caused an accident and injured someone else?"

Be prepared to handle objections. If they say, "I carefully grip the handrail on the stairs," mention that a slip could still occur and lead to a serious injury. If they say, "I've never had a car accident," let them know the likelihood increases for senior drivers and you want their clean record to remain in place. Be understanding, but help them face the reality of their situation. If they participate in solving the problem, they are more likely to accept the solution.

2 | Be prepared. Do research ahead of time so you can be a resource of information.

Have potential solutions ready in the event your parents are willing to discuss a change. You might be bringing to the surface some concerns they already have.

If the issue is to stop driving, look into alternate transportation services in your parents' community. If their area doesn't offer reliable public transportation, ask among their neighbors, friends and other family members to see who might volunteer driving services.

On the other hand, if your parents resist your implication that there's a problem, back off for now and wait for the next opportunity. Chances are, they will be thinking about what you said.

On having choices:

"Most of us are more likely to change our position and lifestyle if such a transformation is of our own choosing. Placed under duress to change, we typically resist, regardless of the soundness of the other person's arguments."

–Barry J. Jacobs, PsyD, author of *The Emotional Survival Guide for Caregivers*

3 Start sensitive discussions early.

Be proactive. Don't wait for a crisis to occur to address your concerns. Talking about sensitive issues is much easier during times of low stress.

However, proceed slowly. Deeply personal issues are challenging and may be complicated. They have emotional, physical and financial ramifications. Most importantly, your parents' independence and dignity are at stake.

Secondly, whether they are financially secure or not, chances are they're worried about running out of money someday. Because these issues require planning, and a solution may take some time, raise concerns as you first notice troubling changes.

If your parents mention a particular difficulty to you first, welcome it and use it to open the discussion in a way that is natural and comfortable. If you must broach the topic first, find a time when your parents are relaxed and in a positive frame of mind.

4 State your specific concerns.

What changes have you observed that are worrisome? Be clear and honest so your parents understand your concerns.

Gather facts. Has anyone else, such as neighbors or family members, mentioned seeing anything unusual? Use all of these incidents as examples to support your concerns as you talk with your parents. Each new example helps to support your concern now and in future conversations, allowing you to say, "Mom and Dad, as we discussed before…"

5 Avoid beginning the conversation with the solution already in mind.

You may feel that it's time to consider a drastic change in their lifestyle, such as moving to a retirement community or giving up the keys to the car, but major decisions can take time for your parents to process. Transitions require an ongoing dialogue. The first discussion is almost never the last.

Your initial goal should be for them to accept the reality of their situation. For example, taking care of the house is becoming overwhelming and a change may be in their best interest. Have options in mind, but don't try to force them on your parents. Your goal is to arrive at a plan with which they agree and are comfortable.

"YOU WANT ME TO STOP DRIVING?"

Jim's family was getting more concerned about his driving. Though he had no accidents, he was driving a lot slower, and his daughter Sandy experienced two close calls when riding with him. Recently, he had difficulty finding his way home from his brother Bob's house, a 30-minute drive he made countless times over 35 years.

During a relaxing Sunday visit, Sandy and her brother Brad decided the time was right to voice their concerns. Brad first asked Jim how his car was doing and when it had last been serviced. "It's fine. I had it inspected a few months ago. No major problems." Brad asked how often he was driving. "About once a day—to the store mostly, sometimes to visit Bob or a friend."

Sandy said she heard he had difficulty finding his way home from Bob's place. Jim said it was no big deal—he just hadn't been concentrating like he should have. She then mentioned the two near misses over the past few months. Jim said, "I was waiting for you to bring that up. That could have happened to anyone." Sandy sensed by her dad's voice and expression that the near accidents had scared him a bit, too. She said, "Yes, Dad, it could have, but it happened to you, and you're the one I worry about. I love you and want what's best for you." Jim replied that he had scaled back his driving quite a bit. "What do you want—for me to stop altogether?"

There—Jim mentioned the actual possibility. Brad agreed that Jim had cut back on his driving over the past year but joined Sandy in expressing concern. "Maybe it's time, Dad, to think about the next step. But let's not rush. Why don't we mention this to Dr. Rose when you go for your appointment next week? Let's see what he has to say."

Jim's children knew that he didn't want to stop driving. He had always liked to drive and was proud of his clean driving record. But he seemed willing to see what his physician thought.

Sandy and Brad assured Jim that they didn't want to force him into anything and the three of them would look at the issue together, including transportation alternatives if he did stop driving. They told him that his independence was important to them, as it was to him, and they would explore with him other options for going to the store and visiting Bob and his friends. At the end of the conversation, Jim seemed relieved that his kids had his best interest at heart, and he wouldn't be facing an uncertain future alone.

More than 75% of drivers age 65 or older report using one or more medications, but less than one-third acknowledged awareness of the potential impact of the medications on driving performance. —AAA

Per mile traveled, fatal crash rates increase noticeably starting at ages 70-74 and are highest among drivers age 85 and older, largely due to increased susceptibility to injury and medical complications rather than an increased tendency to get into crashes.

—Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, "Fatality facts 2013, Older people"

6 Be supportive. Assure your parents you will help find a solution.

Conversations like these stir up emotions—feelings of uncertainty, loss and even grief. Understand and accept why the discussion is difficult for them. It's probably one they hoped to never have, even if they had a similar one with their own parents.

Assure them that they're not going to face the future alone, that you will be with them during any transition. Let them know that the problem isn't "theirs" but rather "ours." Try to keep the discussion positive and be patient as they sort out conflicting feelings.

7 Be a good listener and try to understand what is really going on.

Are Mom and Dad resisting suggestions? Try to determine why. Perhaps they have financial concerns. Maybe their dignity is threatened, or they're in denial.

They might resent their child giving them advice. If they haven't needed to rely on you previously, this may be foreign territory, and they might be slow to enter it.

If they're reluctant to admit to a problem or seek a solution, patiently engage them in conversation that could elicit the underlying reason. Knowing what they're really dealing with will help you understand their perspective.

8 Avoid having these conversations during times of high stress.

Timing is important. Stressful times like an illness, hospitalization or death are the worst times for your parents to think clearly and positively. That's true for all of us.

Wait for a more relaxed time to raise concerns. Use incidents that should be fresh in your parents' minds to begin the discussion. Don't be surprised if your parents are already thinking that something has to change. But don't plan on it, as considering and accepting new limitations are difficult.

If an emergency occurs that catches everyone off-guard, then a discussion amid tension may be inevitable. You can be most helpful by calming their fears and helping them approach the situation and any decisions cautiously and rationally.

9 | Invite others to be part of the discussion when appropriate or necessary.

Consider including experts, other family members or those who would provide trusted support such as clergy or close friends. For example, physicians often notice physical or mental changes and can have more influence on the decision to discontinue driving than adult children have. If your parents firmly resist your intervention, maybe you're not the right messenger. Perhaps one of these other trusted persons should take your place.

10 | Explore solutions together to reduce the fear associated with these changes.

Discuss the various options and write each one down, listing pros and cons. For the issue of stopping driving, list alternatives to Mom or Dad no longer having his or her own transportation. What other services might be available? For living situations, what are their options? Remaining at home with a weekly cleaning person or daily caregiver? Moving to a retirement community?

Understand that your parents have to feel they're making the choice and it's not being forced upon them. Your goal should be to arrive at a solution that everyone can accept. Keep in mind that the initial solution may eventually give way to a subsequent solution down the road. ***Good luck!***

After age 65, an American has more than a 70% chance of needing help with the activities of daily living like dressing and bathing.

–American Society on Aging

On the right approach:

"Make it your problem instead of your parent's problem. If you say 'you have to do this, or do that,' you'll lose them. Instead say something like, 'Mom, I'm concerned about you; it makes me worried to see you like this.'"

–Stella Mora Henry, R.N., author of *The Eldercare Handbook*

"A RETIREMENT COMMUNITY FOR US?"

Mary Jane didn't know what to do. After 62 years of marriage, she was beginning to feel isolated and alone. Her husband Fred had dementia, and she had cared for him since his diagnosis two years earlier. Fred knew Mary Jane was his wife and could converse with her, but he often forgot names of friends and family members, and he frequently misplaced items and forgot important details. Mary Jane told him which pills to take and when, she did all of the driving and she even was starting to help him with daily hygiene, like bathing and dressing. She was tired, but she didn't want to ask for help. She took her "for better or for worse" marriage vows seriously and considered caring for Fred her responsibility.

Mary Jane and Fred had one child, Lora, who lived three hours away with her family. She visited when she could, but with full-time work, two sons in college and a daughter expecting her first grandchild, Lora had a lot on her hands. She saw her parents about every six weeks and checked in twice a week by phone. Mary Jane always said everything was fine, but lately Lora wasn't convinced. And during her last two trips home, she saw her dad declining a bit more. Lora decided she would visit her parents the next Sunday and asked her cousin Carol to join her. Carol was like a second daughter to Mary Jane and Fred.

What Lora and Carol found alarmed them, but it made their conversation much easier. Within the hour before their arrival, Mary Jane was helping Fred in the bathroom. She left him alone for a few seconds to go to the hall closet when she heard a thump. He had fallen in the bathroom and smacked his head on the tub. He wasn't hurt badly—just a black and blue bump on his head—but he blamed it on Mary Jane and raised his voice with her. That wasn't like Fred. Mary Jane then helped Fred into his easy chair. Though she acted as if nothing was wrong, Lora and Carol could tell she had been crying, and the ugly bump on Fred's head was obvious.

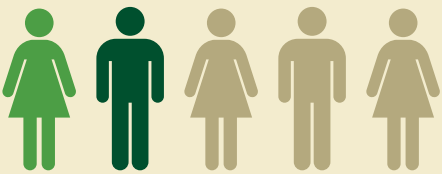
Lora and Carol expressed concern over Fred's condition and the toll it was taking on Mary Jane. They didn't realize the situation was as dire as it had become, so they weren't prepared with possible solutions, but Lora and Carol began planting the seeds of moving to a retirement community. They were aware of several respected ones in the area and, though they didn't know the costs, Lora thought that shouldn't be a problem for her parents. She knew, though, that getting her mother to consider a move from their home of 53 years would be a challenge.

As expected, Mary Jane responded with "But how would we get to church?" and "But your dad is such a fussy eater" and

"I don't know if I would like living that close to other people." Lora and Carol felt that with each rebuttal, Mary Jane was seeking for her resistance to be overcome. It was as if she needed assurance that pondering such a move didn't signify failure on her part. And when Mary Jane was reminded by Carol of how happy her parents were at their senior living community, Mary Jane smiled and seemed to entertain the idea.

When she said, "But what would we do with all this stuff we've accumulated here?" Lora said, "One step at a time, Mom. We've just begun to talk about this. I'll call the retirement homes we mentioned and see when we can get in for a visit. In the meantime, maybe we can get you some help here at home."

Though Mary Jane had been nudged, she didn't feel pushed. She felt that she was still calling the shots and that whatever she decided, Fred would accept. Mary Jane and Lora slept better that night.



Two of every five American adults are family caregivers.

–Internet Health Tracking Survey, Pew Research Center, 2012

On peace of mind for family: *"I didn't want to depend on my children, and when my back was bad, someone was with me all the time. They're really glad I came here, and I feel good that I know other people my age. My kids often tell me, 'Mother, you're doing things and we don't have to worry about you.' That's great to hear."*

–Country Meadows Resident

On accommodating couples with different care needs: *"My wife knows me, needs me and wants to be near me. Even more important, I need her. I go to exercise class and meet other fellows and chat with them about current events and sports. I have adjusted to living here to be with her, and the co-workers love her, too."*

–Husband of a Country Meadows Resident Couple

About 5.1 million Americans living with Alzheimer's disease today are 65 years or older.

–Alzheimer's Association

SIBLING STRATEGY
WORKING TOGETHER TOWARD A COMMON GOAL

To arrive at the most satisfying solution for aging parents, adult siblings must work together toward the goal, whether it's limiting Dad's driving, getting in-home care for Mom or convincing parents to consider a retirement community. That means putting aside past differences and any lingering resentments. It means cooperation and collaboration—not competition. You're all on Mom and Dad's team.

Siblings should get together early in the process—at the first signs of a problem. Waiting until a crisis occurs means quick decisions with a lack of research, often leading to a less-than-ideal outcome. Instead, siblings can begin researching the issue and outside sources—driving alternatives, home care services, retirement communities—bearing in mind that preparation now sets the stage for solutions later.

The optimal scenario is for all siblings to meet in person to review the situation, list the various needs and come to agreement on a recommendation for Mom or Dad. Family therapist Barry Jacobs says, "It's crucial that all the adult siblings are giving their parent the same general message." Though parents have the final say, they should take comfort in knowing their children care and are united.

Depending on the parent's situation, siblings may have a number of responsibilities to share. Duties should match each person's strengths when possible. Elder law attorney Harry Margolis says, "Every family is different, so every family has to work out the best arrangement for them. I think I've seen just about every arrangement." He mentions duties like legal matters, personal care, health care, shopping and home maintenance, adding, "In many cases, the effort can't be equalized, especially if some siblings live close to the parents while others live far away." Perhaps brothers or sisters who live out of the area can take on tasks that can be done by phone or online.

Siblings should expect a degree of tension, though advance awareness can help them recognize, accept and overcome stressors. The main stressors are sibling roles and rivalries, sharing responsibilities, perceiving parents' needs and spending money. Working through differences is hard work—certainly easier said than done.

Some common pitfalls among siblings:

- letting one child take all the responsibility
- not showing appreciation for the one bearing the load
- avoiding tough realities
- assuming your siblings know what to do
- reverting to childhood roles or rivalries
- not planning ahead

WHAT NOT TO SAY
WHEN TALKING WITH AGING PARENTS

At one time or another, we all say what's on our minds rather than pausing to consider a more positive way of voicing a concern or complaint. When talking with elderly parents about sensitive issues, careless words can evoke negative reactions.

Here are 10 phrases NOT to use.

1. You sound confused.
2. You already told me that.
3. How could you not remember that?
4. What does that have to do with it?
5. We have to do something about this right now.
6. Your house is a mess.
7. When are you going to stop driving?
8. You're not taking good care of yourself.
9. You can't handle this anymore.
10. Here's what you should do.

Instead, **try using more positive, helpful statements, such as these.**

1. You seem to have a lot on your mind. Is there anything you would like help with so you don't have to worry?
2. Are daily housekeeping, chores and errands keeping you from activities you'd rather be doing?
3. What if you tried ____ for a few months to see how it goes?
4. I know you're concerned about _____. What do you think are some helpful options to consider?
5. Is there some way I can be helpful? I'm willing to look into some options to ease your mind.

Successful Conversations

All of these pitfalls can be minimized with open and honest communication, and that means not just expressing your thoughts but listening to your siblings' opinions, accepting their viewpoints and being willing to compromise.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, keep Mom and Dad involved and informed as much as possible. After all, this is all about them.

On maintaining independence:

"We wanted to make sure Mom wasn't living a secluded life or feeling that she was alone in her home. She's a very social, active, independent person. We wanted her to keep experiencing that independence, and she does that here."

–Daughter of a Country Meadows Resident

Expert Advice

Get advice from an expert in senior living

Tom Baker, senior vice president of Sales and Marketing at Country Meadows Retirement Communities, says every family situation is different, and he and his team have worked with many families to identify what lifestyle option is right for them—which may or may not be a retirement community at that time. "We focus on the family, offer advice and explain the available options. Emotions and self-imposed obstacles—such as denial, reluctance, defeat, pride, guilt or misperception of cost—may cloud a family's decision. Seek out a reputable company and talk to their representatives. They have experience and can offer ideas and approaches to address concerns or resistance. Many families tell us we made a tough decision easier just by listening and being a sounding board. It's our mission to help."

For more tips, visit our website at *CountryMeadows.com/tips,* or talk to one of our experts. If you are looking for a retirement community for a loved one, we invite you to visit any of our communities.

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