

# Critical Conversations With Your Aging Parent, And How to Break the Silence

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It is never too soon to talk to your parent about the future. It is important to discuss their medical care, housing, finances and personal fears and concerns. These conversations are much easier to have when there is no problem. It will start the process of acceptance before any great change has occurred. It gives everyone a chance to talk about his or her worries and reassure each other there is a plan.

No one plans to take care of his or her parents. We don't set aside money or time for the task, or begin reading articles such as this one as a parent turns seventy-five. For the most part, a parent's old age and their needs and problems come as a surprise. Even when events begin to happen and the reality of the situation becomes apparent, most of us still look the other way, hoping that perhaps things will take care of themselves.

Believe me, I know from personal experience it's not an easy. Every time, I brought the subject up to my Dad his response was "I'm not dead yet". That stopped the conversation immediately. Money issues are always uncomfortable, I was very reluctant to talk about my Dad's assets out of respect for his privacy and out of fear that he would think I am a gold digger. Or it may be difficult to bring up death for fear of upsetting each other. However, it is important to anticipate a time when they can no longer take care of themselves

**Remember as uncomfortable as it maybe to talk about the worst case scenario it will not make it come true and refusing to talk about it won't make them go away. Ignoring the inevitable will only leave you unprepared for a future crisis.**

It is difficult to think about how your role as a child and their role as the parent will change. It forces you and your parent to accept the fact that they won't live forever.

It is important to have conversations such as,

*"Mom what if one day you needed full time care, or had to move, or couldn't make decisions for your yourself? "What ifs" are always easier to talk about than when the problems are apparent? It is always difficult to find the words to start the dialogue. "Dad given your health and what the doctor's told us, I think we need to talk about some things."* Discussing the future also helps you and

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your parent emotionally prepare for the future. If your parent starts to think about the possibilities, it will be easier for them to accept the situation when or if it arises.

## **How to Break the Silence**

- Pick a time to discuss your parents health, finances or other matters when you won't be interrupted and when you and your parent are calm and rested. It's always a good idea to include your siblings.
- Whenever possible phrase your concerns as questions, letting your parent draw conclusions and make choices. Ask them what they think should be done and never tell them what should be done. This will create a lot of resistance.
- Be open and clear with the facts such as "a poor medical prognosis, a major financial hurdle, and a less than optimal selection of housing options. Be gentle and truthful; don't hide information to protect your parent. Misinformation or lack of information will only hurt them in the long run.
- End each conversation before either you or your parent becomes tired or overwhelmed.
- Leave the conversation open; these topics need to be revisited again and again.
- If your parent clearly doesn't want to talk about the subject (as in my Dad's case) let them know you are concerned and then bring it up at another time.

No matter where you are in the process, the most important thing you can do for your aging parent and yourself is to "Be prepared for what might come". If your Dad has arthritis and it is getting worse talk to him and his doctor about what he wants to do when he can't manage alone. This is the time to start exploring community programs, assisted living accommodations or having them live with family members. If your mother has Alzheimer's talk about concerning her future care and where she wants to live, once the disease is advanced. Start looking at the reality of the situation and start making plans. Always give your parent the dignity and respect to be involved in the decisions.

Delaying and denying are natural but very risky. Your parent will grow older, their health will decline and their needs will intensify. Staying informed will give you and your parent the opportunities to consider all of your options. It will give your parent a voice in his or her living situation and in the long run will mean less stress and anxiety for you and your parent. At a time like this a little peace of mind is priceless.

