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Starting the Conversation

How to talk with your loved one about the tough topics
of senior care and planning for the future.



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HOW TO BEGIN A DIALOGUE ABOUT SENIOR CARE

When we begin to notice decline in our parents' health, often we don't know what to do or say to them to try to help. After all, these are the people who raised us, taught us, guided us in our lives. We've only known our parents as independent, strong people. So how can we start a conversation with them when we see they now need help? Whether or not we think our parents just need a little assistance in their homes or we believe they should consider moving from their home altogether, it can be a difficult topic to broach. How can we become a resource to guide them in their decision-making processes?

These feelings are common among all adult children who are taking on the role of helpers and caregivers to their parents. Though we might not have said it openly in talking with our parents—or even in our own minds, the primary challenge to this dialogue is an understanding that the conversation is about loss. The conversation isn't primarily about the options that can help our parents as they age. It's not about bringing in care to the home or looking for new living arrangements. The very heart of the dialogue is about loss. Our parents are facing a keen sense of loss. They are losing control of their ability to do things for themselves. They are losing control of the ability to remain independent. They may face losing their home, a place which very likely represents a lifetime of hard work and memories. Along with this sense of loss will come the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and, finally, acceptance of new options. If your parent suffers from any memory impairment, having a dialogue with him or her about different options may prove more difficult in that the conversation will need to be a repetitive process.

Before beginning a dialogue with your loved one, you must first recognize and empathize with the sense of loss that will be at the heart of your discussion. Secondly, don't assume that approaching the topic logically will be your best approach. The sense of loss is an emotionally charged issue, and someone who is grieving a loss will not respond to a logical argument. Also be prepared to have an extended dialogue because the conversation will take some time as your loved one goes through the five stages of grief. You must value your parent's input—he or she must actively participate in the dialogue—so you are developing a solution together. Your parent will need some time to think about his or her life, accomplishments, any regrets, how life has been lived until this time, and what he or she wants life to look like from this point forward. Respect this process and be willing to listen to your parent's concerns as you help your parent accept the changing situation as a new life journey rather than an ending. Ultimately, your role in the dialogue will be to help your loved one gather and review information, guide your loved one in a direction that reveals more options and addresses any challenges he or she has, and be a resource as your loved one grieves the losses in life at this time. Rather than trying to control the conversation or dictate the outcome, becoming a trusted advisor who can skillfully guide your parent to explore new possibilities will give both you and your parent a greater sense of peace and acceptance.

THE WALL: HOW TO OVERCOME BARRIERS TO DIALOGUE

Your parent is stubborn and independent. If you try to bring up the topic of healthcare options or the need for any type of assistance or life planning, your parent shuts down the conversation quickly. How do you tackle this wall of resistance? Remember that having a dialogue will not work under confrontational circumstances, so scaling the wall of resistance to dominate the conversation won't be your best approach. Instead, try to find an opening in the wall. Begin with a casual approach that will allow your parent to feel open rather than defensive. Respect your loved one's opinions and experience.

One way to begin this type of conversation is to ask for your parent's help. In asking for help, you put your parent in control of the dialogue and you show that you respect his or her guidance.

"Mom, you know I've been thinking a lot about what would happen to my family if I were to pass away suddenly or if I were to need extended care. I know you must've had those same concerns. Can we talk about what plans you've made and what you would want? That will help me understand some of my options as well."

You may also want to talk about someone else's experience to gain an understanding of what your loved one wants while allowing him or her to control the dialogue.

"Dad, did I tell you what happened with my co-worker, Laura, and her mom? Her mom went into the hospital and they decided she couldn't go back home. Laura had to look for other options for her mom. The whole situation was really stressful for Laura because she really didn't know what her mom wanted. I don't want to be in that situation, but we've never talked about what you would want. Where would you want to be if you couldn't be at home?"

"I was at a meeting last week, Mom, and someone gave a presentation on life insurance plans and options for future healthcare needs. While I was listening to the presentation, I started thinking that we've never really talked about what you have in place. Do you have insurance or other information I might need if something were to happen to you? Where do you keep this important information?"

Alternatively, you may want to address the changes you are seeing and ask about your parent's feelings. Acknowledging concerns while putting your parent in control of the dialogue can reveal your desire to know your parent's feelings and concerns rather than indicating a desire to force your parent to make lifestyle changes.

"You've been living by yourself for years now, Mom, since Dad passed away. I honestly don't know if I could do that. Are you still feeling ok being here by yourself? Are there any concerns you have about staying here in the coming years? Is there anything you'd like to do to the house to make it more comfortable for you? Have you ever considered having someone to come in a few times a week to help out with cleaning or cooking or

to take you out shopping? If things had been different and you'd passed away before Dad, what would you want me to be doing for him? Can I do those same things for you?"

OPENING THE DOOR: QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE

As you and your loved one embark on an open and honest dialogue about changing life situations and senior healthcare options, the following questions may be helpful. These questions may also prompt further research before you begin the dialogue.

- How do you define quality of life?
- What health concerns do you have?
- In the coming years, what is most important to you?
- Are there some events or activities we can help you plan or enjoy?
- Who do you want to be involved in your care?
- How involved do you want your children to be in your care?
- Have you made any plans for someone to make healthcare decisions if you are not able to make them yourself?
- Who will make healthcare decisions for you if you can't?
- Have you thought about whether or not you'd want life support if needed?
- Do you have an advance directive, living will, healthcare power of attorney, or other legal documents in place? (You may want to review information from the State of South Carolina's Office on Aging at <http://aging.sc.gov/legal/Pages/AdvanceDirectives.aspx>. The Five Wishes advance directive is also valid in South Carolina: www.agingwithdignity.org.)
- Are your wishes spelled out in writing so there's no confusion about what you want?
- What kinds of aggressive treatment would you want?
- Are there any medical conditions or circumstances that would be difficult for you to manage? How can we best prepare for that?
- Are there any family conflicts we need to be aware of?
- Do you have suggestions for addressing any family tensions?
- Can we help in any way with family conflicts or tensions?
- Where would you want to receive care?
- Is there any place you would not want to receive care?
- Do you have any information on the types of care available for you and the costs for those types of care?
- Can I help you in researching healthcare options?
- Do you know what Medicare pays for and what it doesn't cover?
- Have you ever researched any healthcare options such as hiring in-home care, independent living communities, assisted living communities, skilled nursing care, or hospice care?
- Can I help you get answers to questions you have about any of these types of care?
- Do you have any legal documents such as a will or power of attorney to handle any personal finances or business matters?

- Do you have enough in savings to cover any care costs and living needs?
- Do you have any insurance plans or other financial resources I need to be aware of?
- How much does it cost to keep up your home?
- Do you need any help with home maintenance, or are you able to maintain the home by yourself?
- Does your home need any renovations or structural repairs to make it more comfortable and accessible for you?
- Do you feel safe and secure in your home?
- Is it easy for you to move around in your home?
- Would it make sense for you to downsize?
- Do you know how easily your house might sell? Do you know its value?
- What living arrangements appeal to you?
- How can I help you get more information?
- Are there things about this conversation that frighten or frustrate you?
- Can we process some of this information and then talk again about questions and ideas we both have?

As you begin the dialogue with your loved one, remember that nothing is set in stone. Circumstances can change, and plans can change. Knowing what your loved one wants, though, will allow you both to avoid surprises and to make informed decisions about healthcare options and senior living arrangements.

STATE OF MIND

Before beginning to talk with your loved one, think about the state of mind that you are in and the state of mind your loved one is in. Odds are pretty high that you're not in the same frame of mind. You will be thinking about the topics in different ways. The questions above can help raise some issues that may concern each of you. Most importantly, find out how your parent wants to be involved in care planning and decision-making. Find out who else your parent wants to be involved in this process. If you have siblings or other family members who are taking part in these discussions and decisions, you may want to meet with them before talking with your parent. Find out what concerns you all share and seek their perspectives on appropriate options. If tensions or rivalries among siblings or other family members are prominent, you will definitely want to talk beforehand as any tensions will ultimately affect the dialogue with your parent.

Unless you are facing a crisis that requires immediate action, remember that the dialogue will be a process that moves forward a little at a time. The first conversation will be just that—the first of many discussions about choices regarding your loved one's care and safety. If you are in the middle of a crisis situation and are forced to make quick decisions, ask the healthcare professionals working with you and your loved one for their advice and guidance. As always, the staff at The Springs at Simpsonville will be glad to be a resource for you and provide information you may need.

OBJECTIONS

Your loved one will undoubtedly raise objections to options you may discuss. Those objections are normal and are part of working through the grief of loss. If objections become the primary focus of the dialogue, though, the conversation can be very emotional for everyone. Be mindful that raising objections is not a negative sign. When your loved one raises objections, the door is open to discover more about his or her worries and to talk about ways to alleviate those concerns. You also will know that your parent is actively thinking about the current circumstances and how that might change.

Below are some of the more common objections we hear that may come up during your talk.

- I don't need help with anything. I can take care of myself.
- I don't want a stranger coming into my home to help me.
- All my things are here and I don't know what I'd do with everything.
- My memories are here. This home is where we raised you and your sisters.
- My house is paid for and I don't have any debt. How can I pay for something different now?
- What will happen to my dog (or cat)?
- I want to be the one to care for my spouse. I don't need someone else to do that.
- All my friends are close by. I won't know anyone if I move.
- Moving is an overwhelming thought. I don't know how I'd sort through things and pack.
- We built this house and want to pass it along to our children. The house is part of my legacy.

Every one of these concerns is valid. You must listen and respect your parent's point of view. Try to consider why your parent has a particular concern. Then try the technique of restating what your parent has told you and reflecting on solutions to particular concerns.

Your conversation might go something like the one below.

Mom: "My best memories are in this house."

Daughter: "I know, mom. We had some great times here, didn't we? If you move, are you afraid of losing all those memories?"

Mom: "Well, no. Maybe it feels that way a little, but I know that's not right."

Daughter: "I can see your point. I never thought of it like that before. I can see why it would be difficult to think of moving since all the things you've done and the special memories you have involve this house."

Mom: "I know it seems a little crazy, but I would hate to just walk away from all those memories."

Daughter: “Those memories mean a lot to me too, Mom. If you move, is there a way we can put something together where we can both continue to share those memories? What about finding some pictures and building a showcase or picture album for those? Do you think other family members would want to be involved?”

Your parents will want to know that you not only are genuinely concerned about their safety, health, and well-being, but that you are also genuinely interested in learning more about their concerns, worries, and fears about their future. Beginning a dialogue to help them make changes may seem to be an insurmountable challenge at first; focusing on researching and developing a plan alongside your parents will make tackling this challenge much easier.

You will always be a step ahead if you can help your parents develop plans and think about their healthcare and living options before an emergency forces a change in lifestyle. Encourage your parents to begin this planning process while they can fully participate in the dialogue. Don't wait until declines in cognition or other factors limit your parents' ability to participate in decision-making.

Many resources in the community will prove helpful as you begin your research and planning. Our senior care counselors at The Springs at Simpsonville are here to help, and you will also find helpful resources at your local senior center and through other services devoted to helping seniors: senior-focused real estate agents, moving companies that have senior care expertise, companies that help seniors downsize, elder care attorneys and financial advisors, and geriatric care managers.

Let us know how we can help you start a dialogue with your family. Give The Springs at Simpsonville a call at (864) 962-8570.



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