

Having That **DIFFICULT CONVERSATION** With Your Aging Parents

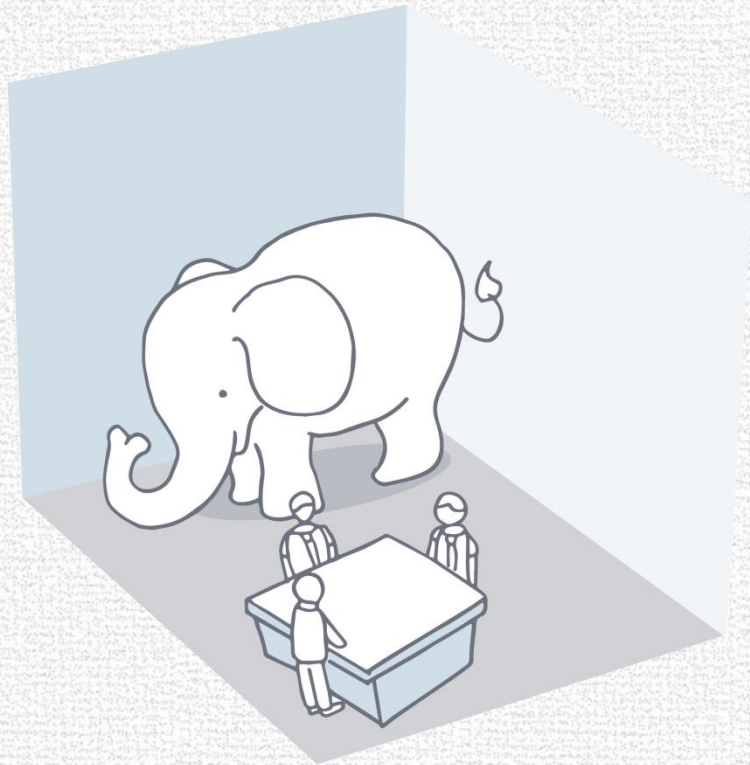


7 Tips for a Productive Discussion

No One Said It Would Be Easy

A great deal has been written about how to have that “difficult conversation” with aging parents. Which one? It might address any number of concerns. It’s that “elephant in the room,” usually relating to an issue or challenge that your older parents are facing now - or that they’ll likely confront in the future. It could be about housing, healthcare or finances.

The conversation may be difficult to initiate because it touches on our parents’ mortality – a topic often prone to “denial.” But learning their preferences regarding important end of life issues now, while they are healthy, sharp and articulate, will almost certainly enhance their quality of life later.



For most children, just the thought of having this conversation is daunting. But according to Risa Breckman, Licensed Clinical Social Worker at Weill Cornell Medical College Division of Geriatrics and Palliative Medicine, it may be easier than you think. “Some adult children may feel uncomfortable raising issues that point to parents' advancing age and/or vulnerabilities. But for many older people, these issues are apparent and they can talk openly about them. The adult child anticipates a difficult conversation but winds up happily surprised to find receptive parents.”

Whether your parent is resistant, reticent or more open than expected, it's almost always more productive to initiate the talk in a non-stressful environment with loving family members. Reflecting in advance on subjects that need to be addressed is a good place to start.





Section 1

Talking to Your Parents About Housing, Healthcare and Finances

The Housing Conversation

Learning where your parents see themselves in their later years is important. Do they plan to work for as long as possible? Is travel on their agenda? Where do they plan to reside? Home, for as long as possible, is often the answer. And if home health care is possible, that may be feasible. But the prospect of senior communities, including independent or assisted living, is attractive to many older adults. Although many folks view the option of a nursing home as a last resort, it can be an attractive solution for seniors who need continuous medical care, steady social activity, and/or assistance with activities of daily living.



It may be premature to make a decision regarding living arrangements just yet, but talking about your parents' preferences and even exploring alternatives in locations of interest might make sense. You may also want to discuss whether it's advisable for your parents to consider living near at least one of their adult children, and if so – which one. Finally, learning about their health insurance and whether they have long-term care coverage are an important part of this conversation, as well

The Healthcare Conversation

Talk to your parents about their current health care. At a minimum, it's a good idea to learn the names of all of their treating physicians and what medications they're taking. And consider asking them to share information about their insurance coverage, if they haven't done so already.

Your parents' wishes regarding healthcare in the event of a life-threatening injury or terminal condition should also be discussed. Advanced healthcare directives, such as a living will and the selection of a health care proxy or medical power of attorney, can save family members a good deal of stress and anguish – in case an unfortunate event does occur. Adult children should also learn their parents' preferences regarding the extent to which extreme medical measures, such as a Do Not Resuscitate order, should be requested if critical circumstances arise and communication isn't possible.

Although these kinds of acute situations may not appear to be imminent, talking about them in advance can save family members heartache and grief later. And the conversation will be far less tense around the kitchen table than in an emergency room. Consulting with a medical professional and an attorney may also be helpful in your discussion about health care in later life.



The Financial Conversation

Although it may be true that money can't buy happiness, being deprived of one's nest egg to enjoy in later life can greatly compromise both quality of life and even life expectancy. Helping your parents take steps to protect their life savings will likely ensure that the devastating effects of exploitation won't taint their golden years.

Even though people are now living longer than ever, many seniors are vulnerable to identity theft and financial abuse. Why? The normal effects of aging, such as memory loss and confusion, can make the handling of one's finances more challenging. And research has shown that issues related to one's "financial capacity" often begin even before we become senior citizens.



Financial Facts:

Seniors lose billions each year due to financial exploitation

For every case of financial exploitation reported, 43 go unreported¹

¹ New York State Elder Abuse Prevalence Study "Under the Radar" 2011

Dementia is another significant problem affecting one's susceptibility to fraud. The Alzheimer's Association recently reported that one in three seniors dies with dementia, such as Alzheimer's Disease. This means that many older adults will have trouble keeping an eye on their savings. Warning signs may include unpaid bills, bounced checks, lost debit or credit cards, unopened financial statements, trouble with balancing a checkbook and other indicators that finances are at risk.

Did You Know?

In 2011, persons reaching age 65 had an average life expectancy of an additional 19.2 years¹

Cognitive impairment and the need for help with activities of daily living make victims more vulnerable to financial abuse

¹ U.S. Census Bureau

An Ounce of Prevention...

Scammers know that elders save their money. They also have a nose for seniors who are struggling with memory issues and confusion.

An ounce of financial protection can prevent many pounds of loss and heartache. With respect to preventing fraud, exploitation and identity theft, taking measures to safeguard assets is critical for you and your parents.



“ While family conversations about money are difficult, they are necessary in order to establish a long lasting secure plan for your aging parents. ”

-- Ruth Weinreb, a mediator from [Talking Alternatives](#)

In talking to your parents about finances

- First, make sure your that own financial health is in order. Seniors aren't the only folks who are vulnerable to fraud and identity theft. If you're not banking online, consider doing so. Many experts believe that banking online can be more secure than "brick and mortar" establishments, as you can view and monitor your account information at any time.
- If your mother and father are amenable, learn where their bank, investment and credit card accounts are located.
- Educate your parents about the different kinds of scams, including telemarketing and internet fraud.
- Consider a service that permits you to have "view-only" access to your parent's bank, credit card and credit report information. An "extra set of eyes" greatly improves the odds that any aberration or erratic activity in financial activity will be spotted and addressed - before it's too late.



Section 2

7 Tips for a Productive Discussion

1

When is the Right Time?

Many experts suggest having the “difficult conversation” early, while your parents are still relatively young and healthy – and certainly before a crisis is looming. You may get a call from your parent’s doctor, lawyer, or accountant that there’s a need to discuss certain issues as soon as possible. Or you may witness firsthand your parent making a decision that you believe is ill – considered or even dangerous to their well-being, e.g., a reverse mortgage, gambling, or a decision about surgery.

Whether you decide to talk to your parents early on or wait until you see some evidence of trouble, it’s important to make sure that the conversation happens.

2

Include Your Siblings

If there is more than one adult child in your family, it's advisable to check in with the other siblings before initiating a discussion with parents regarding legal, medical or financial issues. This may require that siblings get together for a discussion before parents are involved.

While siblings may not see eye to eye on every subject, the best scenario is one in which adult children are basically “on the same page.” It can be incredibly stressful for aging parents to observe heated arguments among siblings about issues related to parents’ financial and legal affairs.

Remember that the goal of “the conversation” is to learn your parents’ wishes, not to imbue them with yours – and the importance of listening can’t be overstated. If adult children need assistance on how to have these discussions or what subjects should be addressed, a mediation service should be considered.

3

Plan in Advance

It's helpful to reflect on subjects you'd like to address before "the talk" occurs. Plans for retirement, health care, financial planning - even preferences regarding burial or cremation may be on the list. The topics need not all be addressed in one sitting.

Advance planning, with respect to the manner in which the discussion will be most productive, is also a good idea. Is a conversation after a family dinner a good time? Or would a meeting with a lawyer or financial planner be more effective? Some families feel that it's easier if one person, such as an adult child or an appropriate professional, takes the lead. Others feel that an open discussion is best.

4

Introduce the Idea of a Family Talk

Consider letting your parents know, in advance, that you'd like to have a family talk about the future. It makes sense to let them know some of the issues you'd like to talk about. The discussion need not be overly formal, but it shouldn't be completely off-the-cuff, either. You could suggest that it happen over breakfast or coffee.

You may want to introduce the need for a discussion by telling your parents that you've been thinking about advance directives, insurance, or financial protection tools for your own family, and realized that you should probably be filled in as to their plans as well. And keep in mind that it's likely you'll need to have more than one talk after the first one – depending on the number of issues to be addressed.

5

Don't Make Assumptions

Many adult children aren't aware that their parents have already identified and resolved important issues related to the future. It's quite possible that Mom and Dad have already discussed their plans with an attorney, a durable POA, a healthcare professional, or other parties. More important, it may be their preference to keep those decisions private. If this is the case, it's important to respect their wishes - while clarifying why the sharing of some of this information might be advantageous in the event of a crisis.

6

Choose the Approach That Makes Sense for Your Family

Once your parents have agreed to talk, what's the best way to initiate the "difficult conversation?" There's no one recipe that works for every family. Relationship dynamics between children and parents can be as different as night and day, from one household to the next. Adult children may want to consider different ways to frame the discussion. There's no need to be overly dramatic, but you do want to let your parents know that you feel the issues are significant.

"For some, this may mean using a direct, fact-based, rational frame focusing on the reasons experts give for putting protections in place," says Risa Breckman . "For others, using an emotional frame that pulls for the parent wanting to be helpful to and protective of the adult children can work, i.e., ' I care about you. You'd really be helping me out if I knew a few things were in place to protect you and your finances.' "

7

Be Direct but Sensitive

Addressing your parents as though your roles are now reversed, with you as the “new and improved” caregiver, is a mistake. Although your intentions in trying to help are noble, your parents are still your parents – even if they have reached an advanced age and developed issues related to aging. Even parents diagnosed with dementia can often give valuable feedback. Ask open-ended questions, listen to the answers, and be respectful.

Have the Conversation

If you're lucky, your older parents are aging well and living into their "golden years" without many challenges. But there will likely come a time when important issues that haven't been attended to will need to be addressed. How do you start this conversation? When is it time to initiate the talk? Who should participate in the discussion? All of these answers can be tailored to meet your family's needs and dynamics. The important thing is to plan for the discussion now and make sure it happens - sooner rather than later. You'll be happy you did.

About the Author

Elizabeth Loewy is General Counsel and Senior Vice President of Industry Relations at EverSafe, a company that applies technology to fight the growing epidemic of elder financial abuse and identity theft. She is the former Chief of the Elder Abuse Unit in the Manhattan District Attorney's office, where she oversaw the investigation and prosecution of approximately 800 elder abuse cases, annually.

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