

Having That “Talk” with Your Senior

Having that “talk” with elderly parents is as uncomfortable as when you discussed the “birds and the bees.”



About NuevaCare

NuevaCare provides non-medical home care services to seniors who need assistance with their activities of daily living.

Our services include:

- . Medication reminders
- . Respite care
- . Grocery shopping
- . Errands & household duties
- . Transportation
- . Supervise walking and fall prevention
- . Light housekeeping
- . Laundry/ironing & changing bed linens
- . Socialization & companionship
- . Alzheimer's/Dementia support
- . Ambulation assistance
- . Incontinence support
- . Bathing & grooming supervision
- . Meal planning & preparation
- . Hygiene assistance
- . Dressing assistance

Conversations involving health, finances, end of life, and independence issues may be difficult, but need to happen sooner rather than later.

Heather had always enjoyed a close relationship with her mother. As an only child, whose father had died when she was young, it had been just the two of them for many years. That bond only deepened when her family bought a house only 20 minutes away from her mom and the house she grew up in. Her mother once again become a constant presence in her life and her family's, as they spent holidays together, enjoyed weekly dinners and had her babysit for her children when they were young.

Yet, around the time her mother passed her 85th birthday, Heather began to notice that she was starting to slow down. Her mother had always been very private and she realized she

knew nothing about the state of her health or finances, or any decisions she had made about end-of-life or future care. Admittedly, she dreaded having that “talk” with her mother. She didn't know how to initiate it, and so she kept putting it off.

Heather's feelings are certainly not uncommon. Family conversations on such topics make all generations uncomfortable. Yet, according to experts, they need to occur and often the sooner they do the better.

In fact, experts believe these talks need to take place when things are going well – before there is a crisis and decisions need to be made hastily.

For starters, it is important for children to know the location of such important documents as insurance policies, wills, health care proxies, living wills, trust documents, tax returns and investment and banking records.

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Somewhat surprisingly, a recent AARP study found that most elderly parents actually feel better about having these kinds of discussions as part of their planning for the future. Such discussions, they say, help them live life the way they wish.

AARP and other experts offer the following suggestions on ways adult children can handle such conversations, depending on one’s style and comfort level:

- Approach the subject indirectly. For example, “I know you’re taking lots of pills. How do you keep track of them? Would a pill organizer from the drug store help?”
- Be direct, but non-confrontational. “Mom, I’m worried that you seem unsteady on your feet. I’m wondering what we can do to protect you from the possibility of falling.”
- Watch for openings. “Uncle Lew, you mentioned having problems with your eyesight. Does it seem to affect your driving? Have you seen the eye doctor lately?”
- Share your feelings. “You’ve always been so independent, Dad. I know it must be hard to ask for help, but you know you can always move in with us, or we can find a good aide to bring in when the time is right.”

As for Heather, she finally got up the courage to have that talk with her mother. Consequently, she learned important information about her financial and medical health – some of which surprised her – and her desire to remain independent as long as possible. Once she broached the subject, she found that pursuant conversations were not difficult to initiate. This has worked out well for both of them.

If you are ready to have that “talk” with an

elderly loved one, you should:

- Leave them with a list of questions or concerns they can think about after the initial conversation.
- Expect them to show some initial resistance. The first time the subject of such a talk is broached they may choose to avoid it. If so, try again at a later date. If it continues, however, act firmly (e.g. “Dad, we need to discuss this now.”)
- Hold a family meeting to develop a mutually agreeable plan, making sure your parents are given a sense of involvement and control over their lives.
- Explore community resources that can help an elderly person remain independent, including home care, meal delivery or transportation.
- Ask your parents for their own thoughts regarding their current needs and concerns and their worries about the future.
- Keep it positive. Avoid role reversal, where you become the parents. Treat them as equals. Even if they make what you consider an unwise choice, it doesn’t necessarily mean the issue is closed or the decision is final. Each time the topic is revisited, they will become less defensive and so are likely to come around to the best decision for them.
- Step back and evaluate. This might include suggesting that your parents talk with a third party – e.g. an estate planner, attorney or financial expert – if you think they could use some expert advice.

Physicians and geriatric social workers point to danger signs that indicate an elderly person needs extra help or an immediate change in their living arrangement. Any such change in personality must be noted. Yet, no major lifestyle changes should be made without discussions that include the elderly loved one.