



Communicating with Your Loved One

Communicating with your aging loved one can be a challenge. You might recognize the need for help, while your loved one seems resistant. Here are some tips on how to navigate through these difficult conversations:

1. **Start early.** Ideally, you start having these conversations before your loved one needs care. The earlier you start, the better because your conversations will be relaxed and will give both parties an opportunity to have their voices and opinions heard. You can also include other family members or close friends.

Having these conversations after a hospitalization or other catastrophic event can be very challenging because the conversation is happening in crisis mode. You have to make decisions quickly. You don't have time to do research. You don't know what your loved one wants. You might be the only family member in town, so it falls to you. The stakes are high so the stress is high. Start having these conversations now.

2. **Start small.** Don't try to solve every problem at once. Figure out what's most important and start there. By trying to tackle everything at once, it becomes overwhelming. There's too much change, so it might be harder to get your loved one on board. Keep it simple, straight forward and manageable.

Try offering a trial period. Is your loved one more willing to accept help if they could try the service first? It might help them feel more comfortable with the idea, as well as give them a first-hand look at the benefits of receiving help.

3. **Ask open ended questions.** These types of questions encourage meaningful conversations instead of "yes" or "no" responses. Open ended questions can also connect you with how your loved one is feeling. It's easy to get frustrated when you're stressed and feeling a sense of urgency about getting your loved one (and you!) help. Don't get angry, or the conversation will break down and neither one of you will be able to communicate any more.

By using open ended questions, you can connect with what your loved one is feeling, gaining a better idea of what they're thinking when it comes to accepting help.

4. **Be straight forward.** It's OK to ask direct questions. "Dad, why don't you want help?" Try to get at the heart of the matter. Is Mom refusing home delivered meals because she has always loved to cook? Is Dad denying help driving because his proudest day was getting his license?

Don't assume that because your loved one is refusing help that they're being difficult or unreasonable. Be patient and dig deeper. You'll find the answers if you keep at it.

5. **Set boundaries.** It's easier said than done, but you need to know what you can and cannot do and not feel guilty. You can't be with your loved one round the clock. Setting boundaries from the start, helps protect you from burnout and stress. Boundaries will help to remind you that although you are a caregiver, this relationship still exists between 2 adults, and there needs to be mutual respect for both parties involved. Not to sound callous, but your loved one will quickly learn that they need help when you're not there to do everything for them.

Having these conversations earlier can help define and set the boundaries ahead of time.

6. **Offer choices.** Can you imagine if someone told you, "I'm sending a housekeeper to your home once a week." Period. End of sentence. End of conversation. Think about how that would make you feel. Why would it be any different for your loved one? By forcing that decision on them, it takes away their independence.

Older adults can feel like there is so much being taken away (the car, their mobility, the ability to go where they want when they want). Often times what's left of their independence is their ability to make decisions about their own lives. It gives them a sense of control. It's important that you do not take this away.

Involve your loved one in the process. Have them choose a service provider that they feel comfortable with. Have them be a part of the interview process. There are usually multiple services to choose from, so give options when you have these conversations. Don't talk about your loved one like they're not there. Let them know their opinions are important to you.

Caregiver Resources

San Diego

The Family Caregiver Handbook was created by the state of Washington. However, we find the resources applicable to family caregivers residing in any state. Please note, some resources and programs referenced in this guide are specific to the state of Washington. For resources available in San Diego, please see the resources listed below:

- Southern Caregiver Resource Center
- Aging and Independence Services
- Caregiver Coalition
- Glenner Memory Care Centers

General Caregiver Resources

- AARP Caregiver Information Center
- AARP Prepare to Care: A Planning Guide for Families (Guide 1)
- AARP Prepare to Care (Guide 2)