

Tips for Having a Difficult Conversation with an Aging Loved One

Initiating a difficult conversation can be tough at any age or stage of life. You may recognize the need for help, but your loved one may be resistant. Here are some tips:

- **Start early.** Having these conversations after a hospitalization or fall can be very challenging because the conversation is happening in crisis mode. Ideally, these conversations start before your loved one needs care and is living safely in their home. This also ensures you can make big decisions together and explore all your options. The conversation will be relaxed and will give both parties an opportunity to have their voices and opinions heard. Decisions do not have to be made right away, it can be a progression.
- **Start small.** Do not try to solve every problem at once. Figure out what is most important and start there. By trying to tackle everything at once, it becomes overwhelming. Keep it simple, straight forward, and manageable.
- **Keep your loved one involved.** Involve your loved one in the process of choosing and interviewing services. Have them choose their top options in different categories such as living facilities and home care agencies. Do not talk about your loved one like they are not there. Let them know their opinions are important to you.
- **Ask open ended questions.** Open ended questions encourage meaningful conversations, instead of “yes” or “no” responses. By using open ended questions, you can connect with what your loved one is feeling, gaining a better idea of what they are thinking when it comes to accepting help.
- **Use empathy and positive language.** Empathy begins with listening. Listen to what your loved one is saying and turn it into a positive. Maybe getting some help in the home will give you more free time to do enjoyable things together. Empathize with the tough decisions and changes that are coming. Try opening with compliments such as “I like how you’ve...”.
- **Be Patient.** It is easier said than done. Many times, difficult conversations do not happen all at one time. Conclusions about life decisions are often not made right away. Sometimes starting the conversation can begin with testing the waters, and seeing if your loved one seems interested. For example, if you are concerned about their driving, you can start by asking “how is the car running?”.
- **Focus on Independence.** Older adults can feel like there is so much being taken away (their car, their mobility, their ability to go where they want when they want). Be sure to give them as much control and options as possible. Look for care options that allow them to use their strengths. Maybe they can still shop for groceries, they just need a ride to the store.