

Me and my aging parent!

We are blessed to be living in a time in which advances in medicine and technology have resulted in greater longevity. Yet, living longer also means that a greater number of Americans will be living with serious health conditions.

Many caregiving responsibilities will fall on the shoulders of boomers, who will find themselves in the tricky position of having to make life-altering decisions for their parents.

When the signs of aging become increasingly evident, you will have to speak candidly to your parents about their need for assistance. Unfortunately, there is no easy way to broach the subject. There are, however, several effective strategies that you can employ to increase the likelihood that you and your parent will reach an agreement on how to proceed with their care.

When possible, plan ahead

Have you thought about having to care for your parents when they get older?

Speaking to your parents about their future needs will help you gain a clear understanding of how they want to live as they age. According to a study conducted by the AARP two thirds of adult children have never spoken to their parents about their wishes should they experience a decline in their physical or mental wellbeing. However, by broaching this important subject, you will be able to make informed decisions on your parents' behalf, should you be required to do so.

Initiating a conversation prior to a health crisis indicates that you are concerned about your parent's future well-being and you respect their choices as to how they want to live in their older years. But more importantly, as *Donna Schempp*, a licensed clinical social worker, explains, you avoid saying, **“Mom, Dad... there's something wrong with you.”**

Timing is everything

If you are thrust into the role of caregiver without any advance warning, then be cautious when broaching the subject with your parents.

Choose a time when they will be most receptive to what it is that you have to say. If your mother is tired and hungry or your father is irritable and upset, do not speak about such emotionally charged issues.

One of the best times to candidly speak to your parent is when a natural opportunity arises. If one of their close friends is sick or dying, has an aid move into their home, or must relinquish their driver's license, then a conversation about your parents' own plans would be timely. Big changes should spark discussion.

You can initiate a conversation by saying something as the following:

“Dad, Morty's son, Michael, told me that his father seriously injured himself as a result of falling down the stairs. Luckily, it occurred on a day that Michael routinely visits, so his injuries were not as severe as they could have been had Michael not shown up when he did. Tell me, what would you decide if you start having difficulty walking up and down the stairs and getting around this big house all alone?”

Location Location Location!

When it comes to communicating about emotional issues, choose an appropriate location. You do not want to compete for you parent's attention. So be sure to choose a PRIVATE and quiet environment where you will not be disturbed. Parties, restaurants, rooms with blaring tv's and loud radios are not good choices!

Be sure to check your own emotional climate

Don't forget, you will also want to check in with yourself and assess how you are feeling prior to having an emotionally intense conversation with your loved one. Take the time to ask yourself the following questions:

How am I feeling? Am I over tired, stressed, sad, or angry?
Would it be in my interest to postpone this conversation until a better time?
Do I have a clear idea of what it is that I want to communicate to my mother?

Am I in a calm and rational mood as opposed to feeling overwhelmed and emotional?

Do my siblings and I agree on dad's need for greater assistance?

Don't do for them what they can do for themselves

Feeling in control of our mental and physical well-being is one of the cornerstones of successful aging, according to a recent MacArthur foundation study.

Your objective as a caregiver is therefore to strike a BALANCE between your caregiving responsibilities and you parents' needs. If your parents can still perform most daily activities, albeit with some difficulty, do not take responsibility for such functions.

Your concern for your aging parent is both natural and understandable. But if you continually insist that they require greater assistance with their caregiving needs, you will demoralize their sense of self. If at all possible, involve your parents in decisions regarding their care. No one likes to be told how to live. So don't expect your parents to happily adhere to choices that have been made on their behalf and without their approval.

Making decisions for your parents should only be done in the event that they lack the mental capacity to do so themselves or if their behavior is harmful to themselves or to another, such as if they refuse to give up driving a car.

Remember, your parents are adults who will try and hang on to their independence for as long as possible. Do not take away their sense of control over their own lives.

Be empathetic

Try and understand that it is difficult for a person to contemplate a time in which they may not be of sound mind or body. Display EMPATHY when expressing your observations about their aging process. Say something along the following lines:

One way to be empathetic is to express YOUR feelings or observations regarding all the changes that your parents are going through. This in turn may help them to express how they are feeling.

You may want to initiate a conversation by saying something along the following lines:

“Mom, I know that you have always been a self-reliant and independent woman. I am sure that having to ask me to accompany you to your doctor’s appointments must be very difficult for you. ”

Don’t own that guilt!

Ahhh GUILT! That familiar feeling that is often inflicted upon us or that we self-impose. When justified, guilt can drive us to do better, but when unwarranted, guilt can cause a great deal of anxiety and influence our ability to make informed decisions.

Try the following strategies in order to lessen your load:

First: Assess how much time you can realistically devote to caring for your parents.

Second: Ask for help.

Third: Seek out information and expert advice in order to make informed decisions.

Fourth: Break large problems into smaller parts and deal with each part individually, so as to gain confidence in your abilities to master the problem at hand.

Acknowledge your own fears

Chances are that if you are caring for an aging parent than you have thought about your own mortality. Use this experience to help you decide how you want to spend your elder years. Reflecting upon such issues will help you cherish your health and independence, and encourage you to proactively plan ahead for your future.

As always if you have any comments, suggestions or questions please do not hesitate to contact me at gill@directionsrc.com

I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Until Then,

Happy Planning,

Gillian Leithman

Gillian Leithman is the president of *Directions Third Age Consultants Inc*, www.directionsrc.com, a company dedicated to helping people prepare for their emotional wellbeing in retirement.

Drop Gillian a line at gill@directionsrc.com or call her at 514.824.1967 or 1.866.811.3055