

Tips for Talking with An Older Adult

Geriatric communication expert David Solie, author of *How to Say It to Seniors*, notes that adult children want to solve the problem and move on. Their parents, however, want foremost to maintain a sense of control and dignity in a season marked by many losses.

A national survey by The Conversation Project found that 9 in 10 Americans want to discuss their loved ones' and their own end-of-life care, but approximately 3 in 10 Americans have actually had these types of conversations. For older adults, families and close friends these conversations may be tough to initiate, but they are valuable and necessary for all involved.

"The need for control is one of two primary psychological developmental tasks of the last phase of life . . . For aging parents, money is the currency of control and its details are best kept secret." -- David Solie

The Conversation Project suggests using certain conversation starters, such as sharing a story of someone else's experiences or using a letter or video as a starting point. Here are some additional ways you can break the ice:

- "I need your help with something."
- "I was thinking about what happened to _____ and it made me realize..."
- "I just answered some questions about how I want the end of my life to be. I want you to see my answers and I'm wondering what your answers would be."
- Ask for help with planning the future.

If the person you are caring for is resistant to help, offer the following reasons offered by the National Center on Caregiving.

"This is for me. I know you don't need help."

Expressing the need as yours, rather than your loved one's, helps maintain her sense of dignity and independence. You can also add that having someone stay at home allows you not to worry while you are gone. Make it clear that you will be coming back.

"This is prescribed by the doctor."

Doctors are often seen as authority figures and your loved one may be more willing to accept help if she feels that she is required to do so.

"I need someone to help clean."

Even if this is not the real reason, often people will allow someone in to clean when they “don’t need” care for themselves.

“This is a free service.”

This strategy may work if other family members are paying for the home care or if it is, in fact, provided without charge. Your loved one may be more open to using the service since she does not feel that she is spending money for it.

“This is my friend.”

By pretending that the attendant is a friend of yours you are relating the home care worker to the family. This can help with establishing trust and rapport. You can also say that your “friend” is the one who needs company and that by having him or her over your loved one is helping him out.

“This is only temporary.”

This strategy depends on the condition of your loved one’s memory. If she often forgets what you say, then she may also forget that you said this. By presenting the situation as short-term, you will give some time for your loved one to form a relationship or become comfortable with home care as part of her daily routine, and give you a chance for a well-deserved break.