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How to broach tough topics your parents do not want to talk about

The holidays can be a joyous time of eating turkey dinner and opening gifts with loved ones, until, that is, adult children introduce a topic into the conversation that could be considered unwanted to their mother or father. To an aging parent who wants to remain independent and in control, any number of sensitive topics, like senior living, healthcare, driving or end-of-life planning can be upsetting.

"Many times, adult children are given a jolt when they arrive home for the holidays and suddenly notice that mom and dad seem frail or aren't keeping up the house the way they once did," says Jamison Gosselin, senior vice president for marketing and communications for Holiday Retirement. "Fear about their wellbeing sometimes leads children to convince their parents to sell their house or create advance care directives when they're just not ready."

In fact, when it comes to sensitive topics, one of the biggest mistakes that mediator Bruce Kravitz at **ElderPeace Partners** sees is adult children demanding their parents to create a will or a power of attorney. "Any senior is going to feel overwhelmed, angry and distrusted with this type of approach," he says. "These conversations are generally more successful when adult children use an air of respect and gratitude, and a little bit of gentle humor – never at the expense of the senior – can also go a long way," adds Kravitz.

Communication tips

Senior advocate Scott Greenberg, author of *OMG, I'm Getting Older and So Is My Mom*, a compilation of advice on topics he says many seniors are unprepared for, has a few tips for adult children who want to talk to their parents about senior living and all that comes with it.

One recommendation: make a concerted effort to show your parents that you care. He suggests saying something like, "mom, dad, I really care about you and your health and I want you to live the best life possible, and, in order for us to do that, I want to be part of the solution."

Another piece of advice: leave personal agendas out of these conversations and "stay focused on the end-game, which is what is in the best interest of mom and dad," says Greenberg. The families who do best, concentrate on the task at hand, "they do not become judgmental, they do not become argumentative, they do not become all-knowing," he adds.

Looking for creative solutions

If you and your parents seem to be at a standstill, maybe it's time to come up with a creative solution. Sometimes the answer you have in mind (your parents handing over the keys to their car, for example) isn't necessarily the only, or even the best, alternative. In some families, parents have agreed to limit their driving to the daytime or to familiar locations, points out Greenberg, who suggests framing such a conversation in a way that aims to keep your parent safe and the people around him or her safe.

Another way some adult children deal with resistance is by asking their parents to give a proposed solution a try, like booking Meals on Wheels for a week or simply eating lunch at a particular **senior living community**. Also, some enlist the support of a sibling or other family member who has a good relationship with mom and dad. Sometimes it's more effective to ask someone outside the family, like a doctor, a minister or a long-time neighbor or family friend, to spell out the possible consequences of inaction. "Third-party involvement creates a way to tone down the rhetoric on both sides," says Greenberg.

Above all else, Greenberg advises against walking away, no matter how exasperated you feel, "many times I see adult children give up out of sheer frustration, and many times that is the worst thing you can do."

Gosselin agrees. "The stakes are very high. If you ignore problems, you could face a crisis down the road that causes tremendous stress to seniors and adult children alike," he says, adding that far too many Americans are unprepared for their own retirement.

Gosselin's concern is borne out by a recent **Long-Term Care trends poll**, which finds that confidence in the ability to finance long-term care remains low overall among Americans age 40 and older. One-third of respondents to **this poll**, which was conducted by Associated Press and the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, said they haven't planned for their long-term care needs, with nearly one-quarter unsure if they will be adequately **prepared for long-term care**. "This is troubling considering that someone turning age 65 today has almost a 70 percent chance of needing some long-term care in the future," says Gosselin.

More about having tough conversations

There are many ways families can start and continue an ongoing conversation about plans for an aging loved one. Discover more about these conversations and how to put thinking about senior living in perspective by downloading a complimentary e-book, "**Tackling Tough Conversations: How to Navigate Five Steps in a Senior Living Move**" at holidaytouch.com/toughconversations.



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