

My parents recently suggested we have The Talk. No, not *that* talk — I’m well past the age of needing *that* talk. The talk I’m referring to starts out, “Well, your father and I aren’t getting any younger ...” and goes on from there. Now it’s known as The Conversation, and in truth, it has the potential to be more of a conversation than The Talk ever was.

It’s no less difficult to get started, though, and there’s no clear roadmap for families to follow. We don’t even have a cheesy metaphor like “the birds and the bees” for talking about aging, eldercare, and end of life issues.

That doesn’t mean your parents aren’t thinking about it, though. Elinor Ginzler, co-author of “Caring for your Parents,” published by AARP Books, quoted an interesting statistic in an interview with the producer of the “Caring for Your Parents” TV program produced by PBS. AARP did a survey of older parents with adult children and adult children with older parents, asking them the same two questions: “Do you think about yourself/your parents getting older and needing some help?” and “Have you talked about it with your children/parents?”

The percentage that responded “yes” to the first question was the same in both groups — parents are thinking about it just as much as their adult children are. Unfortunately, in answering the second question, nearly 2/3 of respondents in both groups responded “no.” Everyone’s thinking about it, but most of us aren’t talking.

Why is that? The simple answer is that nobody likes thinking about death and dying, and most of us, if we do think about it, hope that our loved ones live a long and fulfilling life with few to no infirmities and pass peacefully during their sleep. That’s the best-case scenario, and it’s fine to use this as a starting point.

Asking what your parents would want in an ideal world can be a good way to break the ice, and is one tactic Ginzler and Delehanty suggest. Their book offers sandwich generation adult children some excellent guidelines for navigating the confusing, challenging, but often rewarding waters of caring for our parents as they get older, beginning with how to start talking.



Starting **The Conversation**

Talking with your parents about their future care

by Louise Julig

Even before sitting down for that first discussion, they suggest doing a little background work by evaluating your family’s situation. This involves taking a step back to look at your own family dynamics and what assumptions are being made. As they put it, “It’s best not to assume beforehand that all of your family members agree on what ‘should’ happen.” The second phase is appraising how well your parents are handling the various aspects of their lives, and what their attitude might be to discussing their future.

In my family, we are fortunate that my parents are ready to start talking about their future care, and in fact are initiating the conversation. In many families that is not the case, and parents may be reluctant or even resistant to even thinking about it.

This makes it more challenging for adult children, but families who don’t start the discussion early will end up having it when a crisis hits. Then everything is happening at once and it may be too late or too hectic to have meaningful conversations.

Jan Williams, of Albuquerque, New Mexico, found this out the hard way. “It turns out my mom entered the early stages of dementia (unknown to us at first) before we had the chance to have

discussions about what to do about her belongings, her care, her medical wishes, etc. When we finally tried to get her to do a will, she pretty much refused. She ultimately got to the paranoia stage and would no longer allow me to discuss or have access to information about her assets. I tried to get her doctor to talk to her about going into assisted living to no avail. Bottom line, we waited too long.”

So although it might be difficult, taking that first step is important. Ginzler suggests that the safest way to start having the conversation early is to come at it from the angle of, “Mom, Dad, you’re healthy, doing fine and in control. This is the way we want it to stay. But we’ll only be able to have that happen if we’ve all talked together as a family about how we want to approach the rest of your life so that you stay in control during the process.”

If your parents don’t fit 100% into the category of “healthy, doing fine, and in control,” you can still make up for lost time. Beth Fainberg-Glener, of Encinitas, Calif., found this to be true. Her mother’s rheumatoid arthritis had gotten worse and her father was using a walker full-time after several falls. “I finally absolutely had to insist they get in some part-time help, and after agreeing to try it, my mom is now so appreciative. That process

opened up the conversation for the future. We agreed that as long as they can, we will have someone come into their home, even if it means someone eventually living there. We are lucky in that they are financially sound and can afford it at this point. If things change over the years, we would have to reevaluate, but for now we have a ‘plan.’”

If thinking about starting The Conversation still has you hyperventilating, remember that it’s not an all-or-nothing proposition. Start small, and in the beginning focus on raising the topic instead of finding solutions right away. Remember to listen, not only to the words being spoken but also to the unspoken fears and concerns of your family members, and remember to always follow up within a few months.

There are lots of resources available. “Caring for Your Parents,” the book, DVD, and web site, are one avenue to help families create their own roadmap, and there are many others. Having The Conversation can be a rewarding experience for you and your parents, so talk early, and talk often.

Louise Julig is a freelance writer and mother from Encinitas, California.

Resources ❖

Caring For Your Parents by Hugh Delehanty and Elinor Ginzler, 2005, AARP Books.

PBS Web site and DVD

www.pbs.org/wgbh/caringforyourparents/

This site offers a complete multi-segment video of a PBS documentary program titled “Caring For Your Parents” which offers help for families facing the practical and emotional challenges of caring for aging parents. “They cared for us, now it’s our turn to care for them,” says the program’s narrator. The story of 5 families from the Providence, Rhode Island area confronts the reality of being the caregiver of an aging parent with dementia, recovering from a serious stroke, Alzheimers, or simply living into their 90s when no disease might be in progress but life is made difficult by the body’s degeneration.

Besides the video, the site offers a download of a “Caregiver’s Handbook” which covers many topics including finances, legal issues, health care, insurance, home care, housing and transportation, staying active and caring for the caregiver.

Other resources found on this informative site include tips on how to begin talking with elders about their changing abilities and needs; a checklist of documents every caregiver should have; how to assess an elder’s ability to remain independent; and tips on how to get the most from a doctor’s visit with an elder.



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