

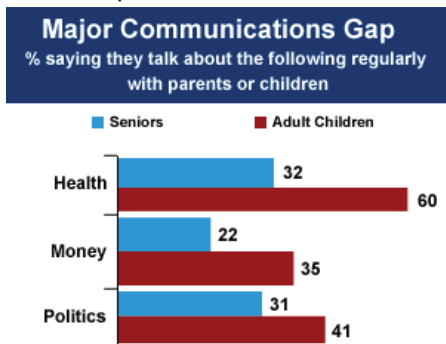
Update: Family Communications: Advice for Caregivers



Improving Family Communications

Family Conversations Get Issues in the Open

Family conversations about seniors' health, finances, living situation or future plans are often difficult. Seniorjournal.com found that adult children think they talk about critical issues far more than their parents do.



(data from seniorjournal.com)

Talking with parents about topics like independence or driving can be difficult. But for your parents' sake, it's important to talk about their issues and needs *before* problems arise. An AARP survey found that parents feel better about having a discussion when things are going well, as part of planning for their future. It's easier to talk to your parents when they are physically and mentally well than when they are incapacitated. The 40-70 rule is a good one to follow – if you're at least 40 or your parent is at least 70, it's time to talk about their needs as they age.

These conversations should give you information to help your parents continue to live independently or determine when they need help. Since their needs will change, you'll need to continue the conversation. Your goal should be an honest exchange of feelings, questions, and fears.

Resources - Family Conversation Starters

Family Caregiver Alliance tips on holding a family meeting - www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=475
Eldercare Online's do's and don'ts of communicating with aging parents
www.ec-online.net/Knowledge/Articles/dosndonts.html

Starting the conversation

Set a time to talk when you won't be pressed for time or have unnecessary distractions. Include the family members who are involved in your parents' care, such as your siblings.

Start by asking your parents what concerns them the most. How do they feel about their health, home, and how they manage their daily activities? What are their hopes and goals - and concerns - for the future? Learning what they want will help you avoid making assumptions about their preferences.

Key Areas to Discuss

- **Where they will want to live** and what living situation is appropriate for their needs. Do they need help to continue to live at home? If they can't remain there, where do they want to live?
- **Transportation.** Can they still drive? Can family or friends help? Transportation services might help them remain independent if they can't.
- **Health** status, needs, and preferences. Are they effectively managing their care and prescriptions or do they need assistance? Consider intervening if a parent's health or safety is at risk. This is a stressful decision, so make sure all caregivers are in agreement about what needs to be done.
- **End of life wishes.** Have they written living wills or other advance directives? If so, where are they? Have they made funeral arrangements?
- **Money** for living expenses and health care. Are their finances in order and can they pay their bills? Do they have long-term care insurance? Do they have the best health and prescription medicine insurance for their situation?

Remember, your parents have the right to make their own decisions (if not impaired by Alzheimer's or other dementia).

About My Health Care Manager

My Health Care Manager helps older adults and their families understand and navigate the health issues and complex decisions associated with aging. For more information, contact My Health Care Manager, 8520 Allison Pointe Blvd., Suite 230, Indianapolis, IN 46250, 317-598-8921 or 800-499-8020 or visit us on the Web at www.MyHealthCareManager.com.

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Even when they make what you consider an unwise choice, it doesn't necessarily mean they are no longer capable of living independently.

- Speak with your parents with a tone of caring and respect, adult to adult, not child to parent.
- Be open and clear about the facts. Serious health and safety issues should be addressed directly.
- Do not be judgmental. Even if you disagree with your parents' answers, try to suspend criticism.
- Don't riddle your parents with a series of questions. They might get confused, frustrated, or resentful.
- Listen carefully. These conversations are a way to learn how your parents view their life.
- Use an indirect approach if necessary, like saying "My lawyer advised me to create a living will, what do you think about them?"
- Don't try to cover everything in one conversation. Make this an ongoing conversation.

If your parents are reluctant to talk with you or another family member, consider bringing in a third party they respect, such as a doctor, lawyer, or clergy. They may find it easier to talk with an outsider about sensitive matters. A third-party mediator can also be helpful if family conversations tend to get heated.

If your parents are not open to a family meeting, look for other opportunities to discuss their needs and your concerns. Try sharing your own feelings about them aging and encourage them to do the same. Raise an issue indirectly by relating it to someone else's experience or something you've read about or seen on television. Watch for an opening, like when they mention having trouble remembering their medications or climbing stairs.

No matter how you accomplish it, good communication can help your parents adapt to changing life circumstances and let you to know when it is time to seek additional support.

A Dialogue: Difficult Decisions

One of the toughest conversations to have with aging loved ones is about their ability to continue driving. It is also one of the most critical, as unsafe drivers are a risk to others as well as themselves.

Factors of aging can affect driving ability, including vision problems, hearing loss, and the effects of medications, as well as more serious problems like dementia symptoms. Add to this the limited mobility and decreased reaction time of some seniors, and getting behind the wheel can be dangerous.

If you are concerned about an older driver, try observing their driving first-hand, or have a professional driving assessment done. Warning signs of unsafe driving include:

- driving too slowly or in the wrong lane
- abrupt lane changes, drifting or forgetting a turn signal
- grazing mailboxes or other cars
- trouble navigating or reading road signs
- getting overly frustrated by driving.

Other indicators that a parent may need to stop driving are warnings or tickets from law enforcement or reluctance by others to ride with them.

For most seniors, being able to drive is not just about getting from here to there. It's a sign of freedom and self-sufficiency, so be sensitive to how they feel about giving it up. Work with family and any caregivers to determine how to best approach the situation.

When you tell a parent it's time to stop driving, be sensitive and respectful, and understand that you might meet with resistance. Don't make accusations, but focus on their sense of responsibility. How would they feel if they were to hurt or kill someone while behind the wheel? Be willing to address other factors that could be causing poor driving, such as reactions to certain medications.

It is important to ensure that your loved one has a voice in the conversation. Try questions such as "would you consider not driving at night?" instead of making demands. And give them an opportunity to acknowledge the problem themselves – many seniors ready to give up driving have already had a close call and may be relieved to stop.

Still, don't be surprised by opposition. To lessen the sting, remind parents that they don't have to limit their activities. They can reduce driving by grouping errands, shopping online, or using public transportation. Volunteers can provide rides to church or running errands – and parents might appreciate the company as much as the ride. Or keeping the car but having someone else drive lets them maintain some independence.

Loved ones who refuse to give up the keys might be dangerous to themselves or to others. You may need to take drastic action, such as taking away the keys, removing the car, or enlisting the help of law enforcement. And some seniors could forget they aren't supposed to drive, making it even more important to remove the keys or vehicle.

Resources - Driving Discussion

Helpguide.org offers numerous resources on seniors and driving -

www.helpguide.org/elder/senior_citizen_driving.htm

AARP has a "Driver's Ed for Grownups" section

www.aarp.org/family/housing/driver_safety_program/

The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety's SeniorDriver.org website includes information for seniors and families -

www.seniordrivers.org