

Our Aging Parents: Facing Difficult Decisions

Facing difficult decisions and delivering unwelcome news with a loved one is never pleasant especially if you're talking with your parents. This can be particularly awkward because your long established roles are reversed and you find yourself "being the parent".

Most of us would rather avoid these issues. But the time comes when these discussions are inevitable. Here are some ideas that may help:

1. Spend some time preparing for your talk with your parents about changes in their lives that makes it necessary to discuss these issues:
 - a. Through direct observation and reports, you see it is no longer safe for them to drive
 - b. The necessity to help them to manage their finances
 - c. The need to get help for them in their home to assist them with their daily activities such as transportation, errands, doctor appointment, meals
 - d. An impending move to either an assisted living facility or a nursing home.
2. Try to think through these questions:
 - a. "What will this mean to them?"
 - b. "What will they perceive that they are losing?"
 - c. "What will happen if I don't have this conversation with my parents?"

If you are setting up assistance for your parents, anticipate they may be resistant to the idea at first. They may see such a change as a loss of independence and privacy. Most personal assistance providers will schedule an in-home meeting to introduce care givers and assess your parents' needs. This meeting will often help to ease your parents' concerns.

In your initial conversations, help them understand the purpose of the changes you are proposing. Give factual examples of incidents that indicate changes are needed. For example, "Dad, when you were driving to the mall on Monday, I saw you cut off another car. Fortunately, the other driver swerved and missed you. This isn't the first time." Or: "Mom, I turned off the stove burner again. I'm really concerned about your safety."

Empathize with your parent's objections calmly. You might say: "I know having someone else drive you places might seem hard at first, but I really want you to be safe."

Don't expect an immediate agreement to your ideas. These important life adjustments take time, and much of the adjustment to the change may come after the decision is made.

Expect a range of responses from your parent and be sure to be patient with yourself. You may feel guilt, grief, fear or anger and these are normal emotional reactions.

After all, you really do care about your parent's well-being. And sometimes, doing the right thing- the loving thing- is a tough decision.