

Now, where did I put my car keys?



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Many adult children may suspect a parent has a type of memory problem. But it can be hard to talk to a parent about it and even harder to convince the parent to see a medical professional. It is important to take memory loss problems seriously as it is not a normal part of aging for people to lose significant thinking ability or memory.

Since many types of dementias may be treatable, adult children (as well as other family members) need to be aware of the signs and try to get their parents to see a medical professional.

Since most adult children always have looked up to the parent, it makes it harder to get involved. It's also common for people with memory loss to deny their own knowledge of symptoms. If they are having trouble balancing a checkbook, they may tell their children the problem is their eyesight.

Be frank, offer empathy

When possible, the best approach is to sit down with your parent and have a frank conversation about medical conditions and living arrangements. It is best to have this conversation prior to signs of memory loss; your parents will be in a better frame of mind to make important medical decisions while they are still in good health.

Think ahead as to when and where to best have this conversation. Pick a place and time when older relatives can hear what you are saying without family and holiday distractions, even if it means you may have to make a special trip to their city just to have this important conversation.

Be honest in letting your parents know what you need to know. For example: "What kind of help would you want if you were not able to do everything yourself but wanted to continue to live safely in your home?" "What would you like to happen if for some reason you were unable to continue living safely in your own home?" Share your own emotions about your parents' changing situation and urge them to do the same, i.e. "Dad, I know you've always cherished your independence. I imagine it's difficult for you to ask for help. Is that right?"

Some people have a difficult time coming to terms with moving out of their home; others prefer to move to an assisted living center well before becoming ill. You also can raise the issues indirectly, related to someone else's experience or something you have read or seen in the news. Example: "I know you're taking pills for arthritis, your heart and cholesterol. I saw a commercial for a pill organizer that keeps track of which pills to take when. Would it help if you had a medication organizer with a slot for each day of the week?"

Watch for opportunities your parents provide. Example: "You mentioned problems with your eyesight. Have you seen the doctor lately? How does it affect what you normally do, like reading or driving?" And one of the hardest questions to ask is "Have you noticed any problems with your memory?" If the parent says yes, say something nonthreatening such as "I've been reading about early signs of memory problems. There are many medicines that can help prevent bigger problems." Many times a parent will say no, as memory loss is one of the biggest fears our aging population has. Try discussing the signs and symptoms of dementia with your parent.

Conversation do's

Use "I" statements. Literally, this means beginning any declarative sentence with the word "I", i.e. talking about "my view," "my perception" and especially "my feelings" rather than talking as if you have a corner on the truth and anything your parents says not only contradicts you but is wrong.

"I" statements can lead to negotiation and sharing, "You" statements may lead to war. Give them time to process and think about what you are presenting. Going too fast can lead to misunderstandings. You may need to have more than one conversation about an emotionally laden topic.

Respect their rights to agree and disagree. Be aware of your own feelings and reactions to the situation and the others involved. Be prepared for the discussion to end before you want it to. Make every attempt to treat the discussion as a door opener, that is, an opportunity to get the ball rolling, rather than the time everything has to be decided upon.

Be clear that the goal is for all involved to figure out the best course of action for not only the parents, but the entire family. Keep the conversation positive. Even in the closest of families, communicating with parents about their needs often requires focus and determination. Respect your parents' feelings when they make it clear they want to avoid a subject. Plan a different approach for a later time.

Conversation don't's

Don't gang up on your loved ones and don't do all the talking. It is important to listen and acknowledge their concerns and questions.

You don't have to answer each and every point when it is made. Don't go in with a fearful attitude - it will become your message. Being clear about your goals and having practiced what you want to say can help decrease anxiety.

Disagreement or defensiveness

(whether it be our parents' or our own) does not mean that there isn't love between the parties.

Don't believe that a quick agreement means the others will agree with you after reflection. People may go away from an involved encounter and think things over again. Be prepared to revisit tough issues several times. Don't "parent" them. The most productive way to help your parents meet their needs will be when your parents and the adult children feel equal in the relationship.

Understanding resistance

You probably can expect to get some resistance as your parents may not want to talk about these issues. Some resistance is common. They may delay the discussion with reassuring statements or tell you to mind your own business.

Try giving your parents a list of questions you have about their current and future health and living situations, and schedule a later time to sit down and talk about them. (Do what feels comfortable and consider your own relationship with your folks when attempting this.)

Be prepared to let your parents make their own life choices even if you don't agree. Your parents have a right to make decisions (as long as their decision-making process is not cognitively impaired with Alzheimer's disease or other dementia). Growing older does not diminish that right. Even when they make what you consider an unwise choice, it doesn't necessarily mean that they are no longer capable of independence. You should set limits on your involvement so that their decisions don't run your life.

Responsibilities and reactions

What is my responsibility as an adult child of an elder in need? I have witnessed many disasters for both an adult child and an elder when a decision that is made out of "duty" or "obligation" creates great stress for all concerned.

What are your responsibilities toward an aging parent? I truly believe that each adult child has to answer that question in light of his or her own set of standards and morals. There is no "absolute" definitive moral standard on this. Family dynamics can get very complicated.

It is sad but true that some aging parents or their adult children are not willing to compromise. Not only do adult children need to clearly explore and define their obligations toward their parent; but an aging parent (if they are still able) needs to seriously consider their expectations toward their children.

Whatever method or route you take, it is best to have this conversation earlier as opposed to later.

Your parents may be far more accepting if they are given the chance to participate in the decision-making process regarding their future.

Next month: Dealing With Memory Loss - Part 3: Talking To Your Adult Children

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