

Parent Care

Let us face it – watching our parents age is not easy. Trying to help them age gracefully is can be even tougher. Failing to act, though, can have serious consequences. Financial problems could deplete your parents' savings and trash their credit. Health problems can snowball.

You don't have to stand by helplessly while your parents endanger themselves or others. This article provides some ways to broach this difficult subjects, and the sooner your discussion starts, the better.

Planning Ahead

It's never too soon to start planning for what might come. That way, you'll be ready if your parent suddenly becomes ill or disabled.

Talk with your parent

It's not easy to do, but get your parent to discuss (with you or perhaps some other person) several issues:

- His fears, needs, priorities and wishes.
- His finances (long-term care can easily cost \$40,000 to \$80,000 a year or more).
- His medical care (what should you know if you have to make decisions for him one day).
- Housing options (where might he want to live if he couldn't remain in his home).

Make sure your parent has:

- An up-to-date will
- A durable power of attorney (this gives you or someone else the power to handle your parent's finances and make housing decisions for him if for some reason he cannot do this for himself).
- Advance directives (a living will specifies your parent's wishes concerning medical care, and a power of attorney for health care names someone to make medical decisions in his stead).
- **Do some homework.**

We all think that our parents won't need companions, much less nursing home care, but many people need one or the other, or both. Do some research now so you're ready if such help is needed.

- Make a few calls to find out about senior services in your parent's community.
- Visit senior housing facilities so you know what's out there.
- If you live far away, have the name of a neighbor or volunteer who can check on your parent if there's trouble, the names of doctors and lawyers, and a phone book from the community.

Signs that a parent is in trouble

- If your parent was a good cook or housekeeper, or very conscientious about paying the bills, and you see a marked change in these habits, then there is reason for concern. On the other hand, if your mother is recently widowed and is having difficulty with the bills, she may just need a helping hand until she can master these new skills.

- If your parent is experiencing a decline in health concerning any of these issues: loss of appetite, change in sleeping patterns, loss of hearing, incontinence, or becoming accident-prone, medical intervention is required. All of these symptoms can be attributed to medical conditions that can be treated.
- If your parent is confused, suspicious or fearful?and this has not been a part of their personality or seems exaggerated?then this is a sign that there is a problem. If your parent goes to a familiar place and can't get home or doesn't remember the names of longstanding friends or family, then it is time for you to act.
- If your parent focuses on negative attitudes and behaviors, this is often a sign of depression. If you notice a loss of initiative in the pursuit of hobbies or socializing, and this is a substantial change, then there is an issue that must be addressed.
- If your parent is drinking more alcohol than usual, or is using medication inappropriately, this is a sign that something is amiss.

Once you establish that there is an issue, the next step is to speak with your parent.

How to Approach Your Parent

Deciding to intervene on behalf of your aging parent is one of life's most difficult decisions.

- First, take an inventory of your role in your family and your parent's perception of you. Ask yourself: Am I the most appropriate person to address these issues or should I involve my siblings?

- Keep in mind your parent's personal style. Are they very private or are they forthcoming? Reflect back on how other family matters have been hand-led for guidance on what style may be most comfortable for everyone.
- Conveying your love and concern is important. A supportive approach is critical. Starting the conversation with an "I?" statement such as "I am concerned because I have noticed...?" or "I am worried?" or "I feel?". Using these statements ensures that your parent will not feel blamed or judged. In using "I?" statements", you are expressing your feelings to which you are entitled and which are harder to argue with.
- If you have a family member or mutual acquaintance who has had to deal with a similar problem, use that experience as a point of reference for discussion.

Remember that the goal is for you to engage your parent in a conversation. Make sure you are talking with and not at your parent. You will gain more by using tentative, exploring questions such as "What things bother you?" and "What do you what to do about this problem?" Ask questions to help analyze your parents plans. It is important not to present answers or conclusions.

Provide your parent with possible resources and information. If your parent is capable, involve them in the process, empower them.

Lastly, be patient, keep a sense of humor. If things get too testy, drop it and try again later.