

July Senior Sense: Tackling Tough Topics As A Family Caregiver

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There came a time in my adult life when I had to ask my stubborn, authoritarian father to heed my advice – I wanted him to stop driving. I was nervous about making the suggestion, but confident, that if he was going to listen to anyone on the topic, it would be me. Boy was I wrong!

I remember I took an afternoon off from work, drove to my father's house, sprung my request on him, and then I quickly became frustrated that he wouldn't agree, in the span of a one-hour visit, to make a major lifestyle change. Who would?!

As a family caregiver there is a very high chance that you too will at some point, and probably more than once, have to broach difficult conversations - either with parents, siblings, paid caregivers, or even a spouse or partner. Trust me, there is a better way than the show up, speak up and give up method that failed me. Use these tips for tackling tough conversations and you'll be much better positioned for a positive outcome.

1. Tough topics require a dialogue, not a monologue. If you are engaging with someone else in the hopes of getting them to take action or change their behavior, then you must listen, as much, if not more, than you speak. If, for example, you are concerned about how well your parents are managing living at home alone, start by asking them open-ended questions about how they think they are doing or what concerns they may have. What are your parent's concerns? What ideas and solutions have they thought about or are they open to? In order to start a true dialogue, you need to tune into what are you hearing and address it as best you can.
2. Remember a meaningful conversation is usually made up of many conversations; give it time. Important issues are rarely resolved through one conversation. Don't expect to sit down, make a request or share your point of view and be done with it. Introduce the topic and then be willing to back off for a while. Along the way, go for small wins. For example, if you propose your parent stops driving and they give you a flat out "No," will they agree not to drive at night, or only to drive on surface streets instead of highways?
3. Be honest about your intentions. Often, when we think something is best for someone else, the truth is, it's actually best for us. Maybe you're worried that your sibling is missing out on time with an ailing parent. But are you also stressed because their absence is causing you to take on more responsibility? Before you can broach the topic, get clear on what it is you want. When you hide your true intent behind a different request, you rarely get the result you want. Of course sometimes what you're proposing is a win-win for everyone so be honest about that too.
4. Do your homework before you initiate the discussion. The more information you have about any issue, the better positioned you will be for a successful outcome. If you want to talk to a paid caregiver about their performance on the job, can you look at the contract first to understand what they are and are not responsible for? If you are going to talk to your parents about changing their living arrangements, get some facts first. What does assisted living cost? Are Meals on Wheels available in their community? What are some alternate transportation options to driving? The more questions you can answer, or objections you can address, the better your chances of getting to a reasonable solution for all involved.
5. Finally, approach all difficult conversations with equal parts courage and compassion. It takes courage to ask for what you want, or to call someone out who is not holding up their end of an agreement. It takes compassion to understand their point of view and find a workable solution for all. Tough topics require a healthy dose of both. Luckily, caregiving requires the same mix, so you can be confident in your abilities. Just keep an open mind and heart!

Liz O'Donnell is the founder of [Working Daughter](#) and the author of [Working Daughter: A Guide To Caring For your Aging Parents While Making A Living](#). For caregiving support, information and resources contact a Senior Care Advisor at Care.com. We are master's-level social workers specializing in adult and senior care. Call us today at (855) 781-1303 x3 or email questions to careplanning@care.com



