



STARTING THE CONVERSATION

The bumper sticker reads, “Be nice to your children; they’ll pick your nursing home.” Not so funny to elders or caregivers. But when you do notice that your parents or loved ones need more help than you ever imagined, you need to know how to start that conversation.

There is a long list of “red flags” that can tip you off when the time has come for that conversation. A few of them are as follows: a gradual or sudden change in mood or behavior; a decline in health or increased trips to the doctor or emergency room; not enough – or rotting – food in the house; change in personal appearance or increased confusion.

If you’re a child and you have siblings, call a family meeting. Have an agenda, appoint a moderator and take notes. Here’s where the local child usually gets what seems like added tasks, but you can assign other responsibility to out-of-town siblings. Ask questions and find out if and what others may be concerned about. This may surprise you.

After the meeting, pick a spokesperson so your parents don’t feel intimidated by more than one person approaching them. Try to use “I” and “me” language, such as “I’m worried about ... I need to know you’re OK ... we feel ... we think.” Explain that it is your responsibility as an adult child to see that they are safe and healthy. Be firm and respectful. Explain that you’re being realistic while being loving and practical, trying to avoid a crisis.

Sometimes it takes a professional or a third party, such as a trusted friend, attorney, or accountant to broach the subject along with you. You may want to mention that you read an article or heard a speaker or program on the subject. This oftentimes helps. You may even be surprised how many elders welcome assistance when offered.

Take small steps. Don’t overwhelm them with too much action or information at once. Allow the elder to participate in solutions to whatever is going on that causes concern. Once they accept your help, do your homework. Know your resources, like local senior services for meals on wheels, senior centers for activities, transportation options, pharmacy delivery, just to name a few. With permission, get to know their doctors. Start a notebook or file with vital information, such as social security, Medicare, secondary insurance numbers, bank accounts, legal documents, financial investments, assets, income, expenses, neighbor’s names and phone numbers.

You can also get expert advice from a professional geriatric care manager who can guide you through what can be a complicated system. A GCM is a professional with the experience to save you time and provide you with information, recommendations as well as ongoing advocacy – especially if you live out of their area – and peace of mind. They are privately paid, but cost efficient when you think of the decreased stress and anxiety, and of spending less time away from work or your own family, while providing a valuable service to the elder and extended family.

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