

How to Talk About Aging

The time for a frank conversation with your parents is right now.

By Joan Raymond

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June 18, 2007 issue - Chris Hrapko isn't afraid of tough conversations. As the founder of a nonprofit social-service agency, she battles bureaucracies on behalf of the homeless and the working poor. But there is one conversation Hrapko avoided. When her 92-year-old mother fell and broke her hip earlier this year, Hrapko knew it would affect her independent mother's living arrangements and health. But Hrapko, 51, was clueless about her mom's wishes. "We talked about a lot of things," she says, "but we never talked about a future in which my mom faced a problem that could leave her disabled, bedridden or on life support."

A recent survey by AARP found that nearly 70 percent of adult children have not talked to their parents about issues related to aging. Some children avoid this most intimate of conversations because they believe their parents don't want to talk. Others think they know what their parents want. And some simply don't want to face the very real truth that if you are lucky enough to have parents who live well into their senior years, chances are good that disease, injury, frailty, even loneliness, will affect a parent's well-being.

While it's clear that having a conversation with aging parents is important, there is no blueprint on how to do it well. What works for one family may not work for yours. The key is to be flexible, says Mary Anne Ehlert, founder of Chicago-based Protected Tomorrows, an advocacy firm for families with special needs. She has found that one of the best ways to get the conversational ball rolling is to talk about your parents' personal values and what they would do if faced with a situation in which people they loved could no longer care for themselves. "Ask your parents for advice; seek their wisdom in helping you help them," Ehlert says.

It's also important for adults to be honest about what they are prepared to do for their parents. As parents age and become frail, many will need help with personal hygiene. It's these kinds of issues that can make the most devoted child balk. "Before you agree to be a caregiver, make sure you understand what you may be in for," says Monika White, president-elect of the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers. "Adult children need to acknowledge their own limitations and then be prepared to make some type of arrangement for the things they simply can't do."

Realize that there is no such thing as one conversation about aging. "No one resolves the future in one afternoon of talk," says psychologist Brian Carpenter of Washington University in St. Louis. "It's a process." One strategy is to schedule time to talk about a specific subject, such as wills or living arrangements.

The upside of having a conversation about the future is that adult children may find they get to know their parents on a deeper level. "I never knew my mom was lonely," says Hrapko,

whose mother is thriving and making new friends in an assisted-living facility near her daughter's home in Chardon, Ohio. "How I wish we would have talked about the hard stuff sooner." When it comes to aging parents and their children, sometimes a good talk is the best medicine.

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