

## Talking with Aging Parents

It's an issue millions of baby boomers face today: figuring out how to have positive, meaningful conversations with their parents about the inevitable changes that come with aging. For many boomers, they are the "sandwich generation," assuming caregiving responsibilities for their parents even as they continue to care for their children. The caregiving burden can be overwhelming. But knowing how to anticipate and discuss the needs and wishes of aging parents can make life easier and more satisfying for all generations. Here are Marti's insights and practical tips on how to talk candidly and supportively with aging parents:

### I. Why is it often so difficult to talk with aging parents?

- Changes that come with aging (e.g. loss of independence, memory difficulties and serious health problems) evoke strong feelings for both generations – sadness, fear, frustration and powerlessness, for example. Difficult emotions on both sides can make it hard to have these important conversations.
- The relationship you've had with each other in the past shapes the way these interactions go, for better or worse. If your relationship and your ways of coping have been characterized by anger, avoidance or denial, or accusations and defensiveness, those patterns complicate these discussions of sensitive topics.

### II. What are the most effective ways to have these essential conversations?

- 1) Start early before problems arise  
*While parents are still healthy and independent, start conversations about how they envision their lives when they begin to have difficulties. Ask about their hopes, concerns and how they would want you to tell them if you notice changes. How can you support them in having the best life possible?*
- 2) See through each other's eyes  
*How must it feel to your parents to give up activities they've always enjoyed? How does it feel to know others are irritated with their forgetfulness or their need to walk more slowly? What is it like to lose friends and family members, your familiar home and neighborhood, your sense of purpose? At every age, children to elders, people thrive when they have the 3 Cs, connection, competence and contribution. How are your aging parents finding those important ingredients for happiness and fulfillment?*
- 3) Listen and problem-solve together  
*Ask open-ended questions (ones that don't have a yes or no answer) to hear how your parents view an apparent problem and what ideas they have for addressing it. For example, you could say, "I notice you're not going out with friends much anymore and I'm wondering how you feel about that and what's getting in the way?" It may be fear about driving or slipping on the ice. Or it could be a hearing problem that is embarrassing or cuts into the enjoyment of movies, concerts or conversation. Whatever the problem, brainstorm together about how to solve them and/or to find new ways to stay connected with friends.*

4) Seek support and, if needed, professional help

*There are good resources in most communities that offer supportive connections for seniors and caregivers. You need and deserve support for yourself, especially if you are one of the millions of members of the sandwich generation who are caring both for aging parents and for children. If you are struggling because of longstanding difficulties in your relationship with your parents, counseling or therapy can make a great difference in your own health and wellbeing and in mending or rising above old hurts. That, in turn, may even enhance the relationships you have with your children and may ease the way for them when it's their turn to care for you.*

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