



Home Helpers®
Home Care

How to Start the Conversation

There are certain topics we tend to put off discussing because we worry the conversation will be uncomfortable – at best – or even confrontational. Why ruin a pleasant visit with a talk nobody particularly wants to have?

One obvious example is talking to an older parent or other loved one about their living arrangements and whether they'll need help. No matter who brings it up, we tend to approach this particular conversation with the kind of anxiety usually reserved for surgical procedures.

It doesn't have to be like that.

With a little thought and preparation, any family can start an open and honest dialog that can lead to a plan for the future that everybody agrees to and understands. We start by asking questions. But not just a series of yes-or-no choices: real questions about what your loved one enjoys doing and how they can keep as much of that treasured independence for as long as possible.

Ideally we'll have this conversation well before there's an immediate need for assistance or any intervention.

Here are eight conversation starters that are neither threatening nor confrontational. These questions can be customized to your particular situation and used as a jumping-off point to learn more about what everybody in the family wants and needs to feel independent and secure.

You probably won't need every single one of these approaches. They're designed as conversation starters, so once you've begun talking you can let the discussion unfold naturally and comfortably.

1. Is there anything around the house you need help with?

This line of discussion can help identify any immediate needs. Are certain tasks becoming more challenging? Is your loved one finding it difficult to operate or maintain anything in the home? Are their senses, balance and stamina where they'd like them to be?

2. Are the oven, range, refrigerator, dishwasher, etc., working properly?

- *When was the last time you used them?*
- *What did you cook?*

This question and any follow-up inquiries may reveal

whether a senior is still getting proper nutrition. What, if any, obstacles are there to a consistent and healthful diet?

3. Are the washer and dryer working?

- How often do you do laundry?

Again, understanding the challenges our seniors face can help them anticipate their future needs. Even for a younger person, doing the laundry can be an exerting chore. For an older adult living alone, it may become easier to let physically challenging tasks slide when they become more difficult or inconvenient.

4. How is the car running?

- How often are you getting out?
- Where do you go?

We live in a society that is engineered around the automobile. The ability to drive oneself or ready access to shared transportation is in many ways the very definition of independence, particularly for older adults. As with all of these questions, it's best to consider options well before an immediate need arises.

5. How are your friends?

Do you see much of them?

- What's new with them?
- How do you keep in touch/where do you see them?

Socialization is important at every age. Often a loss of mobility, a lack of energy or the declining health of friends and acquaintances can limit seniors' ability to maintain relationships, with a negative effect on their physical and emotional well-being.

The following techniques are useful in going deeper into the needs and desires of your loved one to determine current and future needs for independence and security and for beginning the process of creating a solid plan.

6. What would make that easier for you?

Any of the subjects discussed above will naturally become more time-consuming or difficult, if not both,

as a natural part of the aging process. By thinking in advance about what accommodations or supports might be needed, we can prevent risking a senior's security and independence and avoid making rushed decisions in the future.

7. If you could change anything about the house, what would it be?

It's important at this point to listen thoughtfully to the answers your loved one provides to questions like these. For example, if they respond that they wish they had a laundry room on the first floor, that may indicate that carrying laundry baskets up and down stairs is already or likely soon will be an obstacle. Likewise, issues of size or layout of the home may indicate current or anticipated maintenance or mobility challenges.

8. Have you thought about what you'll do when that's not as easy anymore?

This entire discussion leads up to this very topic. This is the time to establish some general principles that will guide specific plans you make sooner and individual decisions you make together later. How does your loved one prioritize security, privacy, independence? Are there family, friends and neighbors who can become part of an extended support system? With what kind of regularity? Are modifications needed to the home, the placement of furniture or some outside services that can be engaged to ease the burden of living alone? Finally, when and under what circumstances should the family look at alternatives, including moving to a more senior-friendly space or bringing in part-time support?

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