



Difficult Conversations with Care Receivers and other Family Members

At one time or other caregivers face difficult conversations with the care receiver, as well as with other members of the family. The most difficult conversations are usually about legal matters such as wills, medical power of attorney and living wills; financial matters of paying for care and managing money to pay for living expenses of food, clothing and shelter; and talking candidly about the current health situation and the ability to take care of oneself. Many families stay in denial or avoid these conversations until there is a crisis which is not the best time to make good choices.

Remember that the caregiver, the care receiver, and other family members are often experiencing complex emotions even if they are not aware of it, including fear and guilt. The older adult fears loss of independence, being a burden, and other complex emotions. The caregiver fears their ability to do the right thing and guilt about whether they are doing too much or not doing enough.

By following some basic guidelines these conversations can accomplish a great deal. Stay focused on the health, safety and well-being of the older adult.

1. Have a family meeting in person or via telephone to talk about options and how to share responsibilities.
2. Involve the care receiver if they are able to reason and make decisions. The challenge for family members is to identify the limits of being able to meet the desires of the older adult.
3. Write down discussion topics ahead of time including key points you would like to bring up and examples (i.e. Dad should not be driving.)
4. You may want to write some specific points for each topic or even a brief script.
5. Have all the information related to the discussion topics available for others to review, including medical reports, descriptions of community services, and roles for family members.
6. Stay calm; take a few deep breaths if you become emotional. Each person make react with emotion during talks of losing independence or about death. Expect this but move forward.
7. Let each person vent frustration and make suggestions. No one way is the right way, but by allowing each person a chance to contribute you keep integrity and respect as well as open lines of communication.
8. Have all parties make suggestions. (Jan can take Dad to the Senior Center on Monday's & Friday's; Paul can arrange for shopping on the weekends; I can take Dad to doctor's appointments).
9. Write out a plan so all parties can agree. Keep the communication lines open for suggestions and changes.
10. Maintain ongoing communication via email and phone and after some time has passed, meet or communicate again to determine if the plan is still working or needs some adjusting.
11. Even with all parties in agreement, circumstances may change. Be prepared to have a back up plan.

Even following these guidelines, conversations still become emotional. To make decisions with and for a loved one can be very challenging but with love and compassion these conversations can be successful and needs met.

Call the Area Agency on Aging at 2-1-1 resources and assistance available in your area. For more information and online education go to Family Caregivers Online at www.familycaregiversonline.net.

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