

## The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

### When It's Time To Have "That Talk" With An Aging Parent

from the American Counseling Association

It's an increasingly common situation that many families face. Improved health care and healthier lifestyles have many people living well into their 70s, 80s and beyond. And while many of these folks may be in relatively good health, it's natural that their children begin to worry that their aging parents can no longer care for themselves as well as they once did.

Such situations can result in a variety of emotionally-laden decisions that require family discussions.

It can often be extremely difficult to discuss, never mind reach decisions, about issues such as where elderly parents should live, what health services are needed, current financial situations, wills and estate planning, the surrendering of a driver's license and related topics.

But, while such discussions with an aging parent may be difficult, they are necessary. And there are ways to make such talks less prone to disagreement and more apt to lead to productive results.

Start by picking a time and place for important conversations that will make your parent feel comfortable.

A big help in holding useful discussions is to speak in a way that avoids judgmental "you" statements, such as, "Dad, you have to accept..." Instead, talk about what you feel and think about an issue, rather than taking the position that what you believe is correct while your parent's views are simply wrong.

It's vital that you respect your parent's right to argue and disagree. Listen to your parent's feelings, views and ideas, especially when the subject involves major decisions. Realize that your job is to offer advice and support, not to dictate how things "must" be. It helps for you to see how difficult it may be for a parent to admit that he or she is becoming limited and less capable.

You might also include someone you and your parent mutually trust, but don't make your parent feel he or she is being ganged up on.

Accept that reaching necessary decisions may take time. See initial discussions as door openers, chances to get the process started.

It's emotionally difficult for parent and child when an aging parent can no longer handle daily life on his or her own. Holding effective discussions on changes to be made can be much more productive, and far less traumatic, than simply trying to dictate decisions. If extra help is needed, seek out a professional counselor who specializes in geriatric issues.

*"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at [www.counseling.org](http://www.counseling.org).*

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