Communication Matters

Talking to YOUR Parents

BY DAVID GOODMAN AND FRANK ESPOSITO

Roger Betts has always enjoyed a close relationship with his mother. As an only child, whose father died when he was barely a teenager, it was just the two of them for many years. Even after he finished school and took a job in Atlanta, he spoke to his mother at least two or three times a week. The bond only deepened when his company transferred him back to New Jersey a decade ago and he moved with his family to a house only 15 minutes away from her. His mother became a constant presence in his life again and in the lives of his wife and two daughters, always available for weekend babysitting duties and family dinners at their favorite Chinese restaurant.

Yet, several years ago when his mother passed her 85th birthday and began to visibly slow down, Roger grew worried. His mother had always been very private and he realized he knew virtually nothing about the state of her health and her finances, her feelings about remaining independent, or even thoughts about her final wishes.

"I knew we had to have 'that' talk," he remembers. "It was like the middle-aged version of the birds and the bees and, frankly, I dreaded it. I didn't know how to initiate it and so I kept putting it off."

Roger's feelings are certainly not uncommon. Family conversations on such topics make all generations uncomfortable. Yet, according to experts, they need to occur and often the sooner they do the better.

Experts, in fact, believe these talks should take place when things are going well, before there is a crisis and decisions must be made hastily. Children, they say, need to listen uncritically and treat their parents with the respect and dignity they deserve.

A recent AARP study found that most elderly parents actually feel better about having these kinds of discussions as part of their planning for the future. Such discussions, they say, help them live life the way they wish.

The AARP and other experts offer the following suggestions on ways for children to handle such conversations, depending on one's style and comfort level:

Approach the subject indirectly. For example, "I know you're taking lots of pills. How do you keep track of them? Would a pill organizer from the drug store help you?"

Be direct, but non-confrontational. "Mom, I'm worried that you seem to be unsteady on your feet. I'm wondering how I can help protect you from falls."

Watch for openings. "Uncle Joe, you mentioned having problems with your eyesight. Have you seen the eye doctor lately? Does it seem to affect your driving?"

Share your feelings. "You've always been so independent, Dad. I imagine it's hard to ask for help. You know you can always ask us for help if you need to, or we can find someone who can."

Here are some other recommendations for children of elderly parents to consider:

Make a list for your parents that includes questions or concerns they can prepare prior to the conversation.

Expect some resistance. Experts advise that children:

Respect their parents' feelings if they make it clear they want to avoid the subject. Try again at a later time.

Push the issue if health or safety is at risk, while recognizing your parents' right to be in charge of their lives.

Act firmly, but with compassion. For example, "Dad, we need to deal with this now."

Hold a family meeting where everyone discusses concerns and together develops a mutually agreeable plan—giving your parents a sense of involvement and control over their lives.

Involve other people your parents respect. This may include a member of the clergy, an attorney, or a close family friend.

Look for community resources that can help a parent remain independent, including home care, meal delivery or transportation. For example, most people refer to remain in their current home and today there are options that bridge the spectrum from living totally independently to being in long-term care. Many elderly people, even those with early-stage Alzheimer's, manage to live within the comfort and familiarity of their homes because of the various community services that now exist. Many, for example, prefer live-in care, with a trusted caregiver, over being moved to a nursing home. Senior only independent housing, Continuing Care Retirement Communities (CCRCs) and assisted living all offer housing options.

Focus on key points and ask your parents for their own thoughts regarding their current needs and concerns and their worries about the future—rather than guessing, which can lead to bad mistakes and hard feelings. This can involve whether they still feel comfortable living at home, the status of their health, their ability to get around, and their financial situation which includes their ability to pay future health care costs. Ask about the location of such important documents as insurance policies, wills, health care proxies, living wills, trust documents, tax returns, and investment and banking records.

Keep it positive. Avoid role reversal, where you become the parent. Treat them as equals. Even if they make what you consider an unsafe choice, it doesn't necessary mean they are no longer capable of living independently.

Expect that the discussion will be ongoing rather than a "one shot" deal. Each time the topic is revisited, it should become more comfortable.

Step back and evaluate. This might include suggesting that your parents talk with a third party—an estate planner, financial expert or attorney—if you think they could use some expert advice.

Physicians and geriatric social workers warn that there are a number of danger signs that indicate that an elderly person needs extra help or an immediate change in their living arrangement. As a result, any marked change in personality or behavior should be noted. However, no major lifestyle changes should be made without discussions with the elderly loved one, other family members, and health professionals.

Once the ice is broken, it will become easier for parent and child to hold discussions. As for Roger, he finally got up the courage to have that talk with his mother. Consequently, he learned important information about her financial and medical health—some of which surprised him—and her desire to remain independent as long as possible. Once he broached the subject, he found that pursuant conversations were not difficult to initiate. This has worked out well for both of them.

David Goodman and Frank Esposito run Expert Home Care in New Brunswick, which specializes in live in and hourly home care, and Companion Connection Senior Care, an organization of non-medical home care agencies with over 175 members in North America. They can be reached at 800-270-6949.