



RightConversationsSM

from Right at Home

with the expert advice of Eboni Green, Ph.D., R.N.

You've noticed changes in your father lately, and ...

today he told you that he forgot food he placed in the oven and it caused a kitchen fire. Luckily, he had a fire extinguisher nearby and put the fire out himself, limiting damage to the oven and one wall. But what if he had gone to bed and the unthinkable happened? Maybe it is time to have "the conversation."

Concern about your loved one's daily safety and comfort may be overwhelming at times. The subject can be difficult to broach, and you may not feel comfortable initiating a conversation about it. If you feel this way, you are not alone.

Communication barriers are a real challenge for family caregivers. Conflicts within the family and communication gaps with healthcare providers can lead to frustration and stress in the caregiving cycle. So how do you initiate an effective conversation about the matter?

RightConversationsSM is a practical guide for families, offering realistic tips and ideas for effective communication about family caregiving. **RightConversations** provides a solid foundation for families. The suggestions in the guide will help your loved one remain in the home safely for as long as possible while reducing the stress that accompanies family caregiving.

Being a family caregiver is honorable and one of the most meaningful things you will experience in life. A solid plan for effective communication can greatly enhance this experience.



Tip 1 Gather Accurate, Relevant Information

This is particularly important as your loved one's condition may be in flux. The suggestions here can help you do this effectively.

- Make a note of what you see occurring. Do you notice your loved one can no longer perform specific tasks?
- Listen to your inner voice. It could be telling you something is not quite right with your loved one or his/her condition is changing.
- Accompany your loved one to doctor appointments so you hear information firsthand and can get a true picture of your loved one's condition. You also may be able to speak directly with the doctor. Your presence may be comforting for your loved one and beneficial in determining whether your loved one needs assistance.
- Ask about medications. Although you may not be a medical expert, it is important to take note of your loved one's medications. You can obtain information about medications and their adverse effects from a physician, pharmacy, library or the Internet. Problems arise when medications expire, are the wrong dose or the wrong prescription. Be proactive and contact the pharmacist or other sources if you have questions about your loved one's medications.
- Document information. Consider using the [RightConversations Information Journal](#) to help you keep all relevant information about your loved one in one place.

Tip 2

Determine the Level of Concern Warranted

Observation is an important aspect in determining whether your loved one needs additional support. Perhaps you've found unpaid bills or spoiled food in the refrigerator, or you sense a decline in his/her condition but are just not sure whether your concerns are valid. Use your observation skills to help validate your concerns.

If any of the following statements are true, your loved one may need assistance.

- I am concerned about my loved one's safety.
- My loved one has recently experienced a fall.
- My loved one is no longer able to cook or use household appliances safely.
- My loved one suffers from memory loss that threatens his/her ability to function without assistance.
- My loved one requires help with bathing, dressing, grooming, toileting and/or medications.

As you sort through your loved one's needs, consider using the [RightConversations Family Action Planner](#). It can help you understand and organize the assistance your loved one needs, and note which tasks have been delegated to family members.

Tip 3

Review the Facts and Avoid Personal Biases

Once you've gathered information about the situation and determined that your loved one needs assistance, the next step is to sort through the facts and your observations. Remember that assumptions about your loved one's well-being can make things worse. It is important to broach the subject carefully, so consider the basis for your concerns. As you study the facts, try to limit the influence of your own personal biases. Keep in mind that what matters to you may not be what is most important to your loved one.

It is also important to understand that there may be personal feelings involved: unstated anger, frustration and/or disrespect from times past. The conversation is not about judgment. Your goal should be to ensure your loved one's needs are met.

Tip 4

Involve Siblings

Make sure you involve all the right people in the conversation with your loved one from the beginning, even if it means extending an invitation to a sibling with whom you have challenges. Consider the following:

- It is important to help siblings who live at a distance truly understand the magnitude of the situation.
- Your loved one may share different information with different family members, creating information gaps among siblings. Address these differences quickly so lines of communication remain open.
- Set aside self-interest. Losing focus on your parents' well-being can distort the decision-making process.

Tip 5

Plan the Conversation

Organizing yourself for a productive conversation is extremely important. You might consider writing out a list of concerns before speaking to your parent or loved one. Using a planner (like the [RightConversations Communication Planner](#)) allows you to organize your thoughts. Here are some considerations to address:

- Do what you can ahead of time to help your loved one be ready and open to the discussion.
- Set realistic goals for the conversation. What do you and the other family members hope to accomplish?
- Who will lead the discussion? Ideally, one person should lead the conversation, with others providing moral support.
- Determine the correct setting. When and where should you hold the discussion? The setting is important, as it sets the tone for a comfortable conversation. The setting also includes the time frame allotted for the conversation, which should be no longer than an hour. Past an hour, the conversation tends to unravel. Frustration and anger also have a higher chance of surfacing when the conversation drags on longer than the allotted time. If no consensus is reached at the end of the hour, another meeting might be warranted.
- Plan and practice the key messages for the conversation.
- Address the facts as well as things that just don't seem right with your loved one.
- Know the discussion could be difficult and be ready for it. You may choose not to address everything in one sitting.
- Use open-ended questions, as they are effective in gathering information.
- Thank your loved one and siblings for their time.
- Practice the conversation. This will allow you to choose your words carefully and thoughtfully.

Tip 6 Create a Positive Conversation

To ensure the conversation is a positive one, keep these things in mind:

- Listen with the intent to understand rather than to respond. When you allow yourself to listen without giving advice, you have the opportunity to fully appreciate your loved one's perspective.
- Express love and concern for your elderly loved one.
- Do not hold in your emotions. Holding feelings in can lead to anger and frustration and shut down a conversation. Address each concern as it arises.
- As needed, express your feelings either through venting privately or discussing them with a friend, counselor or support group members.

Tip 7 Be Aware of Differences in Communication Styles

When working with siblings and other family members involved, understanding common communication styles may help. The more information you have about how each family member communicates, the more confident you will feel in your ability to support your loved one.

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Type	Characteristics	How to Overcome
Assertive	May talk more than listen in an effort to control the conversation. May dominate the conversation.	Remind this person that each sibling wants to be heard and encourage him/her to make a sincere effort to listen respectfully for the perspectives of all involved.
Composed	Comes across as calm, cool, relaxed and friendly under pressure. May be skilled at silently disagreeing and acknowledging others' perspectives.	Use his/her skills to assist in creating a greater sense of being on a team and supporting one another.
Reserved	May not say much. May seem disinterested in the conversation.	Encourage this family member to participate in the conversation. Try asking open-ended questions so you are able to gain insight from his/her perspective.
Divertive	May choose a different position from the rest and attempt to get others to give in. May wait to say something after the conversation has moved on or bring up past events to distract.	Ask why he/she feels that way. It is important not to let dysfunction drive the decisions. Strive to bring all family members into the fold.
Argumentative	Can be rude, abusive, condescending or insulting in disagreements. May challenge or distract family members or not listen to them.	Slow things down and say nothing until the emotion passes.
Rational	Listens respectfully and acknowledges others. Is open and can repeat what was said.	If you do not have someone who acts in this capacity, it may be beneficial to reach out to a professional who could.
Absent	Family members may view the person who is unavailable for the discussion negatively.	Recognize that individuals cope with challenging circumstances differently. Make sure someone reaches out to this family member with an update of what was discussed.



Tip 8

Understand Why Your Loved One May Withhold Information

When you have the conversation, your loved one may not be as forthcoming with information as you would like, since his/her perceptions may differ from yours. To have a worthwhile discussion where progress is made, it's important to understand why your loved one may withhold information.

For example, you may be concerned with your loved one's safety, while he/she may be more concerned with maintaining independence. Your loved one may fear abandonment or being placed in a facility. Make your intentions clear to minimize unwarranted fear.

Consider also that your loved one belongs to a different generation. Some elders do not feel comfortable sharing personal information with their adult children. It may require emotional vulnerability beyond their comfort level. Parents also may not want to burden their children, making it challenging to develop a full picture of your loved one's unmet needs.

Tip 9 Do Not Make Your Loved One Feel Ambushed

It is never a good idea to approach your loved one in a manner that makes him/her feel ambushed. An ambush can be off-putting, and misunderstandings can occur. Even something as simple as where everyone sits during the discussion is important; for example, ensure that everyone is not sitting on one side of the room or table, which can make the encounter seem like an "us" versus "them" attack and increase the likelihood that conflict will arise. Plan carefully about how your loved one will perceive the conversation, and never make him/her feel ambushed.

When possible, include your loved one in the plans for the discussion, as you do not want him/her to feel that you are going behind his/her back. The intent of the conversation is to partner rather than act in opposition. Take time to acknowledge one another's perspectives and provide your undivided attention so your loved one is free to express and explore deeper concerns of the heart. Your goal is to formulate ideas to keep the conversation open for later. Your first conversation together is not a one-time conversation but will lead to a compilation of important discussions for some time.

Tip 10 What to Do if Your Loved One Says "No"

Just because you have been planning and preparing for the conversation does not mean your loved one is equally prepared to talk. So what do you do if your loved one doesn't want to have the discussion? Try to maintain your focus on what you want to achieve and stay open to the possibility of points you have not considered. Try not to become discouraged and prepare to take a step back to try again after giving your loved one adequate time to absorb your words.

Another equally effective strategy is instead of using terms like "I" and "me," refer back to the overall goal. For example, use the following language:

- "By doing _____, we are able to keep you in your home longer."
- "Doing _____ will make it easier for both of us."
- "We can spend more time together by doing _____."
- "If we do not have to do _____, it will reduce the stress we both experience and make us feel better about our situation."

The Conversation: A Step-by-Step Guide

Opening Statements

Begin by asking your loved one, “What is most important to you at this time” and/or “What is your greatest fear?”

It is important to start with your loved one, as he/she is the center of the conversation. Even if he/she is not able to fully express his/her concerns at the start of the conversation, directing this question to your loved one sets the tone of the conversation and reminds the family why you have all come together.

Next, move on to each family member and ask him/her to share his/her greatest fear, concern or burden. For example, “I know you care deeply about Mom. What is weighing most heavily in your heart?” You also might ask each family member to share what is most important to him/her at this time.

Be sure to describe your understanding of what is occurring with your loved one, for example, “Dad, it might be frustrating to have experienced such a change in the way you are feeling day to day. I understand that you really want to stay at home. Our goal is to get you the support you need so your quality of life is improved and you are able to remain in your home. What are your thoughts about how we can best accomplish the goal?”

Or

“Dad has always been independent. He is a proud man and does not feel he needs anyone coming in and taking over. He is not ready to let go of his independence. What might we do to make sure he is safe?”

The Conversation

Take time to clarify any misconceptions by repeating what the family member said back to him/her. For example, “If I am hearing you correctly, you said _____.” Also, validate your loved one’s feelings. For example, “I see. I did not understand that was how you were feeling.”

State your requests or concerns in clear terms. Remind your loved one and the family that it is OK to ask questions.

Present recommendations using a conversational and informational approach to shape the plan moving forward. Remember that your loved one may not be pleased with all of the suggestions being made throughout the conversation.

Should you have a sibling who attempts to divert the conversation, return to the common goal. For example, “Let’s remember that the goal is to keep Dad in the home safely. Can we all agree?”

Throughout this phase in the discussion, keep in mind the goals and values that are important to your loved one.

If there is more than one solution, try ranking them in terms of viability. Later, each option can be fully explored. Remember that shared decision making is important, so use this approach when possible.

Resistance During the Conversation

If you encounter resistance, it is OK to silently disagree and then patiently continue the conversation as appropriate.

If resistance persists, the goal should be to negotiate a compromise so no one—especially your loved one in need—feels marginalized. Identify options that are of mutual benefit. Try to use support strategies that have worked in the past.

Throughout the conversation, continue to acknowledge the difficulty of the situation and the decisions being made. Keep in mind that the decisions being made should be in your loved one's best interest.

Wrapping Up the Conversation

Should anyone be overcome with emotion, a moment of silence is OK; crying and comforting one another is equally important, as is acknowledging your feelings throughout the meeting.

Keep in mind that another meeting may be required to achieve the desired results (this is the perfect time for everyone to do his/her homework, for example, identifying additional resources).

Summarize the meeting by stating what has been discussed and then outline the next steps.

End the meeting on a high note, when possible. You might share a funny family memory or reflect on the fact that you are able to come together as a family. For example, you might say, "Before we close, please tell me something funny or special about _____."

Your final remarks might include a statement like, "We love you, Mom/Dad."

Don't forget to thank your family for being at the meeting and for helping make such difficult decisions.

Your family may not allow you to follow what is outlined in this guide. Therefore, it is important to adapt your communication plan accordingly and to develop an approach that is authentic for you.

Summary

Communication is one of the most important elements in caring for your elderly or disabled loved one. If you begin with clear expectations and keep the lines of communication open, your chances for a successful relationship are greatly enhanced. Remember that caring for your loved one means having ongoing conversations on the subject.

Appendix

RightConversationsSM Communication Planner:

The RightConversationsSM Communication Planner assists you with gathering pertinent documentation prior to and after the conversation with your loved one.

RightConversationsSM Family Action Planner:

The RightConversationsSM Family Action Planner documents the actions each family member will take so you can better support your loved one. It also contains an area for entering contact information of those who assist in the care of your loved one.

RightConversationsSM Information Journal:

The RightConversationsSM Information Journal assists you in gathering the important information you will need as you prepare to care for your loved one.

How We Care for You

Services we may suggest come from a variety of categories, and include the following:

Companionship/Homemaking

Safety supervision, transportation and light housekeeping

Physical Assistance

Ambulation and dressing assistance

Hygiene

Bathing and other personal care services

Wellness

Everyday health reminders, meal planning and preparation

We also provide care for very specific special care situations when a loved one is affected by disease or disorders, such as:

- Alzheimer's and Other Dementia
- Hypertension/Stroke Recovery
- Heart Disease
- Cancer Recovery
- Hospice/Palliative Support

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