



Serving the needs of older people

Facing change together

Advice for families talking together about issues relating to the final stage of life.



Older people have the right to INDEPENDENCE, PARTICIPATION, CARE, SELF-FULFILMENT and DIGNITY

– United Nations Principles for Older Persons

Issues relating to the final stage of life are common to everyone, regardless of race, income, education level and gender. Fears of dependency, death and loss mean that talking about the changing needs of older people is often avoided.

It's impossible to solve other people's problems for them, but you can help to explore difficult areas so that you are able to make good decisions together.

Key Issues

Some of the important issues of ageing that families may need to talk about relate to:

- Housing – looking at possible needs and options for smaller, more manageable accommodation, retirement village, supported accommodation or residential care.
- Frailty or dependency – becoming dependent on others for help, finding out what support and services are available and the cost, clarifying family members' expectations about providing or receiving help, considering transport needs when driving is no longer possible, and recognising interdependence: we all need help at times.
- Finances – planning how to best manage or dispose of property and assets, making a Will and an Enduring Power of Attorney to help avoid financial abuse, budgeting for changing income.
- Illness and Dying – understanding grief, recognising symptoms of depression and seeking help; thinking about who will provide assistance in

the event of illness, stroke or dementia; accepting the reality of death, deciding on funeral arrangements and respecting wishes.

Good communication between all family members is important, especially if care arrangements haven't been decided.

How to approach the issues

- Regard talking about the future as a normal process.
- Broach subjects before the time becomes critical – perhaps on several occasions.
- Decide what facts you will need to know.
- Consider how best to manage discussion – there may need to be time for adjustment.
- Convey care and concern.
- Plan the follow-up action – allow for a 'change of heart'.

Why talk?

Talking together as a family:

- Helps to identify needs/wants.
- Leads to a better understanding of the present, sorting out of the past, and deciding on options for the future.
- Can decrease guilt, worry or a sense of burden about obligations to older/ younger relatives.
- Allows parents and children to treat each other as adults, free to choose how to live even when/if dependent on others for care or support.
- Helps decision making through clarification.
- Increases feelings of closeness and reduces isolation.

Effective Communication

Getting the conversation started is more important than being word perfect.

If you approach each other with acceptance, respect, and a desire to help you'll find a way through awkward moments and possible disagreements. Paying attention to the words and feelings of the other person will help you both make sense of the changes you are facing. That's a good basis for working out what strategies and decisions will work best for each of you.

Feelings

Feelings are internal reactions. We cannot always know what people are feeling by their actions or expressions. Everyone is entitled to their own feelings and it is important that they are respected. Sometimes feelings are not conveyed directly. If you are uncertain how the person you are talking to feels:

- Describe what you imagine the feelings might be.
- Check whether that is accurate.
- Let them know that you wish to understand, not to judge.
- Share what you're feeling. Say what you're sad or apprehensive about. Tell them what you appreciate about them or their role in your life.

Listening

Active listening can establish a good atmosphere for real sharing to take place. Needs and fears can be expressed and so can empathy and appreciation.

Sometimes you need to talk a little first before others feel comfortable sharing their thoughts. Letting the person know you care and how you feel lets them know you're prepared to hear their feelings and experiences.

- Show you are willing to give time and be attentive.
- Be comfortable with silence.
- Encourage expression of feelings.
- Clarify anything you're not certain about
- New ideas need thinking and time, without pressure to respond immediately.

Non-verbal behaviours

We convey our attitudes in many ways. Non-verbal behaviours include dress, posture, facial expression, eye contact or avoidance, tone of voice, rate of speech, distance from the other person, touch, tension. Our unspoken messages may reinforce or contradict the words we use.

- Make verbal and non-verbal messages consistent.
- Be aware of changes in your voice.
- Maintain a reasonable amount of eye contact, especially when the other person is talking.
- Sometimes difficult things are easier to say if you're side by side looking at something else. You might want to make contact by sitting close, or by touching their hand.

HELPFUL HINTS

Most people remain capable of knowing what is right for them and resist being told what to do. A positive and open attitude helps when talking or trying to find solutions to problems.

Clearing the messages

- Be direct and build on the other's comments.
- Own your own messages. Make 'I' statements not 'you' statements.
- Make messages complete and specific, in simple stages.
- Check whether you're saying what you want to say.
- Get feedback about how messages are received.
- Repeat messages more than once in different ways.
- Check whether you're hearing what is really being said.

Keeping it cool

- Avoid arguments and being on the defensive – be prepared to listen.
- Describe your reactions as they occur.
- Describe the other person's behaviour without judging it.
- Ensure everyone's views are heard.
- Offer reassurance where appropriate.
- Share feelings.
- Be aware of the power of non-verbal messages, e.g. facial expressions, posture, voice tone, eye contact, silence, touch.
- Allow time to work through each issue, or schedule another date for a particular subject.

Talking openly and honestly about the realities of the future means that everyone's needs can be taken into account and the outcome is more likely to be successful.

These conversations are often important ones to have and you may need to think about timing – try to choose a time when you are both relaxed. If you find the conversation upsetting, there is a good chance the other person may be feeling the same way. It's okay for both of you to feel emotional and it's also reasonable to expect you may find it hard to talk about ageing or dying. Acknowledging that to each other can make the rest of your conversation easier.

Cultural Differences

Many families today are made up of people from different ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs. Discussing and respecting different customs, views and beliefs is important as it can help overcome problems, promote understanding and lead to positive and enriching experiences for all family members.

Useful suggestions

- Ensure older family members have an opportunity to share aspects of their culture and life experiences.
- Ensure all family members talk about the features of differing cultures.
- Encourage family members to learn the language and customs of their cultural backgrounds.

Rights of older people

Older people have the right to self-determination and self-fulfilment.

Older people have the right:

- To be treated fairly, live in dignity and security and be valued for themselves.
- To make decisions about their care and quality of life.
- To refuse assistance.

Older people also have the right to access information about:

- Health care – to maintain physical, sexual, mental and emotional well-being.
- Social, financial and legal services – to remain autonomous and independent.
- Home support services, housing options, retirement villages, residential care – to be able to make appropriate accommodation choices.

Remember

- Try to talk through the issues together for the best outcome.
- Not all situations can be resolved – be aware your solution may not be their solution.
- Families sometimes find it difficult to work through issues – an outsider may be able to help.

If you would like to discuss any matters contained in this information sheet please contact your local Age Concern.

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