



How to care for aging parents

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By CARE/Kilchis House and Nehalem Bay House

One day, our parents won't be able to drive, to climb stairs, or maybe even change their own clothes or feed themselves. As painful as thinking about this might be, we need to prepare to help them be comfortable and safe in their last stages of their lives.

“We often see families torn apart when they have to make some of these decisions in crisis mode,” Debbie Meier director at Kilchis House said. “It makes it so much easier on everyone if you talk about some of these things before something happens.”

No one wants to think about their parents at the end of their days, much less talk about it. In fact, according to a study by Merrill Lynch and Age Wave, 75 percent of adults haven't had an in-depth discussion with their parents about things like living arrangements in retirement, long-term care, inheritance, and funeral wishes. But it's not just adult children who are avoiding the "big talk"—nearly a third of people ages 50 and up haven't even had such discussions with their spouse yet.

It's the elephant in the room. It's also one of the most important, difficult subjects you and your family will ever face. Sadly, your parents could one day be fine and then suddenly the next day need a great amount of care, so the more prepared you are in advance, the less stressful this might be for your whole family.

Arrange a Family Meeting for "The Talk"

This isn't a conversation that you can just bring up out of the blue one day over the phone with your parents and siblings—"So, mom, have you thought about moving to a nursing home?"—or during a holiday visit, when stress and family conflicts are already more likely to arise. It's better to plan a family meeting with your parents and siblings (if you're not an only child) and prepare for it by reassessing your own financial situation and feelings. (That could be the hardest part—getting through your own grief as you contemplate your parents' last years and no longer having them in your life. Have a box of tissues on hand.)

When arranging the meeting, you can say: "The purpose of this meeting is to talk about getting mom and dad the best care for their needs and wishes as they get older" (or something similar, but less awkward). Your parents or your siblings might be reluctant to have this talk, but make it a point that it's important everyone is involved.

Kilchis House and Nehalem Bay House offers these tips:

- Have the conversation in person. Video chat, phone, or email won't provide you with honest emotions or feedback.
- Prepare questions in advance so you won't feel rushed or scrambling to get your thoughts together. (See below for some questions to ask.)
- During the conversation, provide undivided full attention so it won't seem like you're forcing an agenda.
- Write important points in a notebook to record details and to reference in the future.

Depending on your family, this could be a very heated conversation, a very quiet one, or maybe one that drags out every emotion you have. Whatever you do, listen. This might be the best example of a time when you need to stop thinking about what you'll say next in order to truly listen to what the other person is saying.

Okay, so what do you need to discuss? The big question is where your parents will live out the end of their days and how to pay for it. You'll want to talk about: your parents' current well-being, what their plans or hopes are for when they can no longer live independently, their financial resources, and how you (and your siblings) can help. The information below could help make this uncomfortable discussion go more smoothly.

Find Out Your Parents' Needs and Wishes

During the discussion, find out what your parents' plans are, if they have any. Do they want to "age in-place" (stay in their own home) or move closer to one of their kids? Would it make more sense to move to a less expensive home—perhaps a senior independent living community (aka a retirement community) where they'll have more interaction with other seniors? Or would their needs be better served by an assisted living residence or a nursing home? (We'll explore these options in a minute.)

You and your siblings should also observe your parents' current health and ability to live independently, so you'll know if they need assistance now. Stacey Hilton of Visiting Angels tells us to look for these warning signs:

- Poor eating habits – weight loss or no appetite – are they able to still cook for themselves? Do they stock their fridge with healthy foods
- Poor hygiene – do they have body odor? Are they bathing and changing their clothes like they used to? Are they neglecting their nails and teeth?
- Neglecting their home – is it not as clean as you remember?
- Forgetfulness – a good indicator are scorched pots and pans, it shows they may be forgetting that dinner is cooking on the stove. Also, are they missing appointments or have lots of unopened mail? Are they losing money, paying bills twice, or hiding money?

- Support system – Do they have a strong support system in town to lean on if they need help?
- Mobility and driving – Are they still mobile? Can they get out of bed, up the stairs and into showers without slipping or falling? Can they still safely drive themselves to the grocery store, doctor appointments, etc...? (a good way to determine this is to check their car for new dents, scratches, etc...)

One of the more dreadful subjects, but one that might need to be broached sooner than the others, is that "car key conversation." If your parents aren't able to drive safely anymore, you'll need to persuade them to give up the car keys or take them away legally if necessary.

Weigh the Senior Care and Housing Options

Your parents might be quite independent today, but chances are one day they will need that long-term care (by one estimate, at least 70 percent of seniors will). There are several types of long-term care solutions, ranging from assisted living communities to in-home aid. Making the best choice depends on your parents' health needs, your resources, and your collective wishes.

Assisted Living Communities, like Kilchis House and Nehalem Bay House are designed for seniors who can no longer live safely on their own, but who don't need around-the-clock medical care. Residents live in their own private apartments, and services provided include daily living assistance, medication help, meals in a shared dining room and housekeeping. Kilchis House and Nehalem Bay House are Tillamook County's non-profit assisted living communities that take Medicaid, and provide affordable, quality care.

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