



“We Have to Talk”:

Tactics for Tough Conversations

Few emotionally rewarding conversations start with “we need to talk”. In fact, we tend to avoid difficult conversations, mainly out of fear that we will make things worse or cause a painful argument with our loved ones. Dodging the situation, however, is not the solution, and in fact can aggravate the already challenging circumstances.

Some important questions about aging that older adults and families should address:

- How do you feel about getting older?
- How is your health? Have you noticed any changes?
- Is it still safe to drive?
- Is your will up to date?
- What happens if you need more help? Would you consider senior living or in-home care?
- Do you have a personal directive? Power of Attorney?
- What are your wishes for a funeral or memorial?

Tips for communicating effectively:

- Focus on what you are hearing, not what you are going to say next
- Be mindful of tone of voice and body language
- Don't be afraid of silence. Let others respond without rushing to fill the pauses with solutions.

Some possible starting points:

- I have something I would like to discuss with you.
- I'd like to talk about _____ with you, but first I would like to get your point of view.

Remember, a conversation is a dialogue **and staying calm is a superpower**. If you feel yourself becoming defensive or frustrated – pause, breathe, and ask yourself – who do I want to be?

5 Steps to guide a tough conversation:

1. Start with Heart 
 - a. Prepare ahead of time. What is the ideal outcome?
 - b. Timing is everything – pick a quiet time with no distractions
 - c. Don't assume you know the answers
 - d. If you believe it will be awful – it probably will be! Try to relax and remain loving and supportive

2. Involve your siblings and other family or friends that are part of the “team”
 - a. Are you the best person to have the difficult conversation?
 - b. Other perspectives often bring insight

3. Speak from “I” and not “You”
 - a. Empathy is key – you want to understand each other
 - b. Don't vent – ask questions and LISTEN without interrupting
 - c. Be persistent without pressuring them
 - d. Give examples of what you are concerned about

4. Advocate – you want the best for them and want to help
 - a. Repeat back what they are saying to you to ensure that you understand their perspective
 - b. Acknowledging their concerns **does not mean you agree**. It means that you have listened and want to understand

5. Agree on a way forward and make a plan together
 - a. Keep notes and brainstorm solutions
 - b. Find common ground and build on it