What Happens If Your Parents Say "No?"

having the CONVERSATION
a heart to heart with aging parents

Most parents who do agree to make changes usually acknowledge that they wish they'd done it sooner

If you have a conversation on a sensitive subject, be ready for a "no." It happens a lot. You may be trying to have a conversation about staying in the family home or just asking parents to think about what comes next. They often initially say they are not ready for changes. You should remain confident knowing that most parents who do agree to make changes usually acknowledge that they wish they'd done it sooner. They gradually find that their decision makes their lives easier and offers more peace of mind.

In many cases, putting the conversation on hold is perfectly OK. It may be time for you to back off for a time, if the situation doesn't involve safety issues. You can go back again with new conversations or topics when the opportunity arises. See our article on "How To Best Get Started" to help you watch for openings to re-start the conversation.

If you genuinely have fears for the safety of your parent and those around them, GET PROFESSIONAL HELP. A social worker they may have worked with in the past, a local case manager, their physician or their pastor can provide help to say, "In this situation, these are your choices … period." You can use a professional as your mediator in this situation so you don't have to play the role of the bad guy. Let them do it for you.

- It's OK to disagree. When this happens, make everyone feel heard, valued and appreciated. Try to keep the conversation calm when there is disagreement. This will help keep the lines of communication open.

- Separate these issues from your overall relationship. Reassure your parents that you are there to help them in other aspects of their lives.

- Keep in mind that often parents are most resistive when they are really struggling.

- If communication becomes strained, call a recess. You might want to set a date to reopen the conversation in a month or two.

- Look for options that can achieve your parents' goals with less risk.

- Family and friends may actually be enabling the situation. If you find yourself doing house chores (yard work, snow removal, house cleaning, stocking groceries, household repairs, doing dishes) on a constant basis, you may need to pull back and let your parents have a good reality check, so that they realize their frailties.

- As adult children you want to be able to fix things for your parents. Give yourself permission to not have to do this. Set your own limits. Your parents can dictate how they will live, but cannot dictate how you will.

- Make sure your parents know you are their advocate. You are on their side.

What Happens If Your Parents Say "No?"

- It can be a good idea to ask if you can accompany them to the doctor when they have an appointment. They will usually tell the doctor everything is "fine." You can bring up an incident or condition that you observed as unsafe or worrisome and ask the doctor about it. This can help the doctor (whose help you may need later) understand the real situation.

- One daughter scheduled "Date Nights With Dad." These occasions helped her understand her father's fears and eventually helped her overcome his objections.

- Keep doing your research to put a plan in place. It will be useful when the time is right.

- Protect your health. This process can be very stressful, so consider counseling or a support group to help you talk through your feelings.

- Your parents have rights; be careful not to tread on them. Remember that your parents are in charge of their own lives and are free to make their own mistakes.

If your parents finally say, "Yes," be ready to move quickly with options you have researched and discussed. Once a decision is made to go forward, aging parents often want things to start happening. You may have to deal with selling a residence and helping your parents move, or begin contacting services to assist them with living at home.