

The 40-70 rule: Helping adult children communicate with their aging parents

The 40-70 rule is a guideline — if you're at least 40 or if your parents are at least 70, it's time to start a discussion about some of the more sensitive issues.

As parents age, adult children are often faced with having conversations about sensitive topics. These conversations can be potentially difficult, uncomfortable, and tense. Consider the following tips on how to approach some common topics.

Seven tips to help you communicate with your aging parents

1. Thoughtful observation

If you're at least 40 or your parents are in their 70's, it's time to start observing and gathering information carefully and thoughtfully. Refrain from reaching conclusions from a single observation and deciding on the best solution until you have gathered information with an open mind and talked with your parents.

2. Talk it out

Approach your parents with a conversation. Discuss what you've observed and ask your parents what they think is going on. If your parents acknowledge the situation, ask what they think would be good solutions. If your parents don't recognize a problem, use concrete examples to support your case.

3. Sooner is best

Talk sooner rather than later when a crisis has occurred. If you know your loved one has poor eyesight or has trouble driving at night, begin to address those issues before a problem arises.

4. Think about how you would want to be addressed in this situation

Remember you are talking to an adult, not a child. Patronizing speech will put older adults on the defensive and may convey a lack of respect for them. Put yourself in your parents' situation.

5. Maximize their independence

Always try to find solutions that provide the maximum amount of independence for the older person. For instance, if your loved ones need help at home, look for tools that can help them maintain their independence. Professional care-giving services can provide assistance in a number of areas including meal preparation, light housekeeping or medication reminders. Or find friends who can help.

6. Be aware of the whole situation

If you notice a change in your parent's behaviour or physical appearance or condition, this could possibly indicate a larger issue. For example, if your dad dies and soon afterward your mom's house seems to be in disarray, it's probably not because she suddenly became ill. It's much more likely to stem from a lack of social support and the loss of a life-long relationship. Make sure that your mom has friends and a social network around her.

7. Ask for help

Many of the issues of aging can be solved by providing parents with the support they need to continue to maintain their independence. Resources such as local senior centers can help provide those solutions.



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