

Productive conversations

Understanding the issues and our parents' wishes

By John Gascoyne

(John Gascoyne is a retired attorney from Fort Collins. Based upon his experiences with his own parents, he wrote These Last Words, a workbook dealing with end-of-life issues. Information on the book is available at 866-228-2396.)

Few of us are completely comfortable dealing with end-of-life questions—whether they are about our own lives or the life of a parent. You can find a good deal of peace, however, once you consider the issues and make the difficult decisions. In helping your parents to resolve these concerns, you are telling them, once again, just how important they are to you.

Offering guidance to our aging parents can afford a wonderful opportunity to thank them for the care we received from them throughout our lives. It can be somewhat disappointing, to find that not all of our advice is immediately and gratefully accepted.

The size and complexity of the task can be made more manageable by asking two relatively simple questions: What issues do we need to talk about? What are caring and effective ways to discuss these issues?

Important issues

Although it may at first be uncomfortable to broach certain topics, aging parents and their children should discuss many issues to help guide everyone concerned and to help meet everyone's wishes.

Beneficial conversation topics should include:

- ◇ Special concerns—Have a frank discussion to disclose unknown issues that might require counseling or medical care.
- ◇ Long-term healthcare—Determine you parents' wishes.
- ◇ Legal documents—Plan for wills, living wills, powers of attorney and similar documents that have been created or that may be needed.
- ◇ Financial concerns—Compile, in one accessible place, information on real property, and investment property owned, insurance coverage, and other financial and business matters.
- ◇ Final ceremony—Discuss their wishes and instructions.

Effective approaches

The most effective ways to approach serious discussions with parents can seem challenging at the outset. In seeking the best approach, consider:

The parent's physical, mental and emotional condition. If an aging parent is relatively healthy, then there is a good opportunity for productive dialogue on an adult-to-adult level. Where significant mental or emotional issues exist, however, you may need to play more of a caregiver role. The more respect and caring that you build into the conversation, the better the chances are for it to be understood and accepted.

Your relationship with your parent. If there has been physical or emotional distance, it may help to engage in some initial trust-building before you address more specific issues. Even where the relationship is close, you might be intruding in areas where your parent has not previously sought help or acknowledge a need for help. If this becomes a problem, you might gently remind a parent that working with you now may be preferable to leaving you to make critical decisions later on.

Including other family members when practical. A parent might be more likely to discuss issues when more than one family member is involved. It might also ease your own anxiety to share the responsibility of understanding and carrying out their wishes.

Listening carefully to your parent. Try to understand the issues from your parents point of view as they talk about hopes and concerns.

Asking your parents to put their affairs in order. Parents will be giving a very special gift to their family by getting their affairs in order, which will relieve others from having to seek information and make difficult decisions on their behalf at difficult times,

Starting to discuss the issues sooner rather than later. The sooner the discussion begins, the sooner that all concerned parties will enjoy the relief that comes with resolving difficult issues.