



Time to talk?

It's a difficult topic, so how should you approach conversations about care needs with loved ones?
Top experts offer their advice

WORDS: Kate Jones

Some conversations aren't easy. But there are times when certain difficult discussions are unavoidable – like when you need to plan for yours or a loved one's future. We've spoken to the experts to find out the best ways to have tricky conversations when it comes to the subject of care.

STEPPING BACK

Holly Roberts, a counsellor at relationship support organisation

Relate, recognises that approaching a difficult topic with someone close to you is always going to be tough. However, she explains that reflecting on the motivation behind a discussion can have a positive impact on the way it unfolds. 'What can really help is thinking about what your intention is for raising a tough subject,' she says. 'Do you want to get something off your chest that has been bothering you, or are you worried about someone

and want to offer them support? Letting them know that your intention is kind and supportive and comes from a place of love helps the conversation get off to a less confrontational start.'

According to Holly, there will likely be many reasons why you may need to raise a tricky subject, but being honest about all of them will help both you and the person you are speaking with to avoid misinterpretations and misunderstandings. 'Being

mindful about your intention for raising something can also help you own and acknowledge any hidden motivation that might be lurking there,' she notes. For example, if the issues someone is facing trigger you too much for you to be impartial.

A GENTLE APPROACH

Holly says that it's useful to be conscious of the fact that speaking about something difficult 'is a way of processing and moving a situation to a different place'. Take things slowly, bit by bit, she advises and be kind to the person you are speaking to. 'If you've never approached a difficult conversation before, it's unlikely you'll solve any big issues in a 10-minute chat.'

The relationship counsellor also suggests setting boundaries for tricky discussions so you know when to come to a halt if things get too much. 'Have a time limit or a time-out, with the agreement that you'll come back to keep talking after a certain amount of time has passed,' she says. 'Having these boundaries gives a sense of security, knowing there is a structure to how the conversation will take place.'

THE EARLIER THE BETTER

For discussions about care options, Helen Burgess, director of marketing and content at Age Space (an online resource providing information about caring for older adults), notes that talking about these possibilities when someone is vulnerable, grieving or sick will not end positively. 'It's better to have these conversations years in advance,' she says. 'You can approach it as a light-hearted, 'what if...?' discussion, but explain it's important for you to understand their wishes. Make them central to the decision process.'

It's unlikely that you'll go through life without having to have a difficult conversation at some stage, and discussions like these are by their very nature challenging. However, by approaching tough conversations with specific considerations in mind, you can help ensure that these exchanges unfold as calmly and as constructively as possible. ♦



Photo: Chris Blott

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING HONEST

Helen Garlick (pictured), 63, is a family lawyer mediator turned author. She remembers the experience of discussing care options with her late mother, who had dementia

My mum refused help from anyone except me, but I lived over 100 miles away, was divorced with three children and a demanding job and had recently had breast cancer surgery.

Every time mum went into hospital – for a fall, a panic attack, or when she'd fainted – I organised day carers for her return home. She would sack them. 'I don't need any help – I've got you,' she'd say. I had to pluck up the courage to reply: 'But I can't do it any more, mum. We need to organise something different where you'll get the help and support you need.'

Being honest with my mum was the best thing I could do. I'd spoken with my aunt and my mum's best friend. We'd all agreed it was time and mum trusted us. I asked her what she'd like, what was important to her. 'A room of my own, with my own bathroom and being near the sea,' she said. 'And somewhere where they're used to dealing with dementia'.

Mum was being honest too. There wasn't enough time to organise a visit before she went into the care home, but despite her dementia, she'd looked it up.

And although she was reluctant, she accepted it was the best thing to do. The last thing she said to me was 'Thank you for everything you've done for me'.