

When The Tables Turn: what to do as your parents age

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Sometimes, the tables turn slowly. Other times, an abrupt change in your parents' health makes you suddenly switch roles. No matter how quickly it happens, you may one day be in the position of needing to help your parents when they can no longer care for themselves.

Start talking early

The best time to have a difficult conversation with your parents about how to care for them when they can't do it themselves is well before the need arises. Begin by talking about what might happen "someday." Just raise the issues without feeling the need to identify exact solutions.

Try not to have preconceived ideas about what would be best for your parents. Listen to their ideas and respect their point of view. Topics to discuss include:

- **Finances.** Your parents' financial status—and any assistance that family members are able to give them—will play a large role in determining their care options.
- **Preferences.** While many elders want to stay in their own homes as long as possible, others find it a relief to move into a senior apartment where they make new friends and have support services available. If they're ready to let go of the family home, be supportive—even if you experience a sense of loss.
- **End of life care.** If they could not speak for themselves, would they want emergency intervention? Resuscitation if their heart stopped or they stopped breathing? Would they want a breathing tube? An artificial feeding tube if they were no longer able to eat?

Consider asking them write a paragraph about their wishes; keeping this with their advance directive will help ensure that their wishes are honored.

- Funeral preferences.
- Important documents. Make sure you know the location of documents like wills, advance directives, long term care policies, financial documents (investments, trust, pension, or annuity statements, and bank account information). If your parents are willing, make copies of these documents.
- Conclude with a list of 'next steps.' Together, agree on what these will be. Do you need to visit some assisted living facilities? Do some research on the costs of home care? Look into nursing homes?
- If your parents are reluctant to have this conversation, consider asking a trusted outsider, like a minister or old family friend, to help.

Helping your parents as they age can be time-consuming and emotionally draining, but it can also be satisfying. Take each step as it comes, and care for yourself, as well, making sure that you allow plenty of time for the things that nurture you, too.

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