

How To Talk To Seniors About Their Needing Help and Refuting Their Defensive Reactions

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Giving up independence and losing the ability to take care of oneself equals loss of power and self-esteem for most individuals. Seniors take this loss one step further and view it as moving towards debilitation and death. Little wonder that Dad or Mom comes across like a “terrible two year old” with a gigantic “**NO!**” in response to your asking them to stop driving, move out of the family home to a retirement facility or accept assistance with their laundry. Here are some pointers in how to handle these delicate situations and get your parent to accept the consequences while they may not be in total agreement.

Make every endeavor to uphold your parent’s dignity.

Dad just twisted his back hosting wet laundry out of the washing machine and feeding it into the dryer. The pain is nothing like he’s had before (that much he’ll admit to), and you think he needs someone to help him, albeit temporarily. You suggest help, but he gets defensive and storms out of the room. What to do? Here are a couple of ways to broach the subject again and help Dad see there’s nothing wrong with accepting some help.

- ***Use “I” statements.***

“Dad I love you and care about you. I want you to feel well and not be in pain. That’s why I want you to get some help with your laundry.”

- ***Compliment him and emphasize what he can do. Then present your suggestion.***

“I am really proud that you’re able to do so many things on your own at this time of your life. You’re a great driver and the best handyman I’ve met.”

“How about if I, come by or Jody (my housekeeper---Dad knows her and likes her) and we’ll do your laundry for the next month. See you next Saturday for your first load.”

- ***Negotiate a trade off.***

Dad helps you fold your laundry, or puts that stack of your last two vacation photographs in albums, maybe even watches one of the grandkids for a hour while you run an errand and you get him help with his laundry.

- **Refute an irrational thought.**

“Let’s talk some sense here Dad. Just because you don’t do the laundry doesn’t mean you can’t take care of yourself. The laundry is just one little part of your life.”

There are gender and cultural differences to consider when asking a parent to give up their autonomy. Men, in general, are less likely to accept assistance with their living. The prouder and more closed a culture the less likely that senior will accept help readily. Quite often an adult child needs to engage in a “fight” so that the parent feels they did not just roll over and give in.

Mom has had her cataract surgery and she admits that she still cannot see well at night to drive. In fact she has had three, daytime, fender-bender accidents in the last two months. You’ve asked her not to drive and she says she’ll only drive to her hair appointment and the local mall and she won’t drive at night. Her license was due for renewal and she let it expire knowing she could not pass the eye test. She is still driving. What to do?

In certain parts of the country not being able to drive is viewed as solitary confinement. In general taking away the car keys is considered loss of freedom.

- **Establish a strong value system. Stress responsible behavior.**

“Mom, you taught me to be a responsible person all my life. Now look what you’re willing to do... be irresponsible, risk the lives of others and your own. I can’t believe this is really what you want to do!

- **Use “I” statements.**

“I want you to be safe and I don’t want you injuring others. Let’s talk about alternatives to your driving.

- **Develop an alternative plan for transportation.**

This may take time to negotiate. Make a lunch or dinner date, or specific telephone conference time to discuss various ways for Mom to get around. (Friends, family, bus, taxi, or perhaps buy a scooter.)

- **When all else fails....**

Borrow the car and don’t return it!

The family house is too big for Mom and her arthritic knees can’t manage the stairs any more. Time for retirement community or assisted living---Mom won’t think of it! What to do?

Use I statements, refuting irrational thoughts, develop alternative plans and emphasize what Mom can do.

A family meeting including all adult children and grandchildren facilitates the importance of this major move. Mom, no doubt, views this impending move as but one-step from the grave. Help her to recognize that there is plenty to do in a retirement community or assisted living home. Have her visit several (like selecting a college). **Be assertive.** Like a broken record repeat the reality that she is not able to live in the home. Help her through the grief and loss of this phase of her life. Seek professional counseling help if needed.