

How to Discuss Senior Living Options With Loved Ones

A 5-Step Guide to Empathetic Conversations

When is it time to move to senior living?

Depending on your family member's health, finances, and general preferences, there may be a long list of details to discuss regarding their future. Beyond logistics, it can be difficult to navigate the whirlwind of emotions most people feel when confronting the possibility of leaving their home. Fortunately, this conversation doesn't have to feel overwhelming. Use our five-step guide to make conversations about senior living easier.



Step 1: Practice empathy and set up a time to talk

Before you jump into a conversation, it's helpful to put yourself in your loved ones shoes. Imagine their thoughts, emotions, or fears. Be empathetic and consider these details:

Location.

The conversation may take place at a close friend or family member's house, or possibly their favorite café or coffee shop during quieter hours. It's important to pick a time and place that presents few distractions for optimal communication.



Personal preferences.

Although it's often easier to interpret body language in person, you can also set up a time to chat on the phone or talk through video. Be sure to ask for their preferences when it comes to when, where, and how you choose to communicate.



Who is involved?

Do you have siblings or close friends that can contribute to the conversation or be supportive? Surround yourself with others if it's beneficial to you.



Step 2: Be prepared

It can be helpful to familiarize yourself with general information about senior living options. Take some time to learn about a few community options, including independent living, assisted living, and memory care. Many communities simplify day-to-day life in different ways for residents. The following questions may help you learn more about their unique preferences.



- *Where would you like to live?*
- *What does your ideal living situation look like?*
- *Would you like more help with day-to-day tasks such as cooking, cleaning, or driving?*
- *What are your thoughts or feelings about exploring senior living communities?*
- *Are there any amenities or services that matter to you?*
- *Are there any deal breakers about senior living, like cleanliness, activities, or pets?*

Step 3: Listen and stay engaged

As you ask questions and guide the conversation, don't forget to prioritize listening. Let your loved one speak their mind and use these active listening tips to improve the conversation.

Do be mindful of your facial expressions, and avoid expressions that indicate judgement. Try to face your loved one, nod, and make eye contact. Give them your full attention — this includes not using your cell phone while they talk.

Do use a positive tone and paraphrase what they say after they've fully expressed a thought or feeling. This lets your loved one know that you are engaged in the conversation and have a desire to understand. This may sound like, "If I understand you correctly..."



Don't problem-solve or sharing your personal thoughts while your loved one is speaking. Instead, when appropriate, ask questions to help them share their thoughts and emotions even more, such as, "What do you mean when you say..."

Don't interrupt. Be mindful of when your loved one expresses their thoughts, and avoid preparing a rebuttal or jumping in with a counter-argument. Let your main goal be to understand their perspective and accept it — even if you strongly disagree.

Step 4: End the conversation on good terms

Whether you and your loved one are on the same page or not, it's helpful to end the conversation on a positive or uplifting note. Use the following tips to wind down the discussion.

Ask a closing question.

Cohen suggests asking, "What has changed for you as a result of this conversation?" A closing question can help you gauge how they are feeling.

Say thank you.

Any conversation about the future can be emotionally draining and tough to process. Let your family member know you're thankful for their time, energy, or open-mindedness. Be genuine, and say what you appreciated about the discussion.



Step 5: Plan for the next steps

Let your loved one know you're committed to reaching a solution together. What are the next steps you can take to answer questions or ease their mind? Assure them you'll find the resources to help, which could mean finding a financial advisor or connecting with a Senior Living Advisor at A Place for Mom. It's also perfectly normal to revisit the conversation at a later date. Make a plan to meet or speak with them again in the near future. The most important part is to create a plan that allows your loved one to feel supported and listened to.

Sources:

- Adar Cohen. "How to Have a Difficult Conversation."
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Preparing for Challenging Conversations with Families.
- Lindsay Foulkes. "How to Have Meaningful Conversations."
- Greater Good Science Center. "Active Listening."