Changes for Adult Children and Their Aging Caregiver Parent
Session 1 of Caregiving Relationships: Conversations on Aging

Goal
Help family members recognize how caregiving affects relationships among family members (awareness)

Target audience
Adult children supporting caregiver parents

Activities
Change and Continuity 10 minutes
It’s Just Not the Same 20 minutes
Whose Decision Is It? 25 minutes
Summary 5 minutes

Supplies
Flip chart and markers
Activities: 1.1, 1.2
Handouts: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4

Activity: Change and Continuity

Share key points:
- Growing older and caregiving roles differ for each individual and family.
- Troubled relationships may remain troubled; strong ones may be challenged.
- You are a son or daughter to your parent(s) regardless of your age. But your role can change when your parent becomes a caregiver.

1. Ask participants to form groups of three. Then have them name an aspect of their relationship with their parents that has stayed the same since caregiving became a part of their lives. Next, name one thing that has changed.
2. **Ask** participants to discuss ways the change or continuity has made their relationship easier or more difficult.

3. **Bring** group together. **Invite** participants to share some of the changes and continuities they discussed.

4. **On newsprint list** issues that cause concern or conflict in families with a caregiving situation.
   - Concerns for safety
   - Proper medical care for parents
   - Time spent together
   - Jobs or tasks adult children should do/help with
   - Worry about parents
   - Difficulty discussing issues

**Activity: It’s Just Not the Same**

**Share key points:**

![When one family member experiences change, everyone in the family can be affected.](image)

![Even though change often involves the loss of something familiar, change also can have positive impacts on our lives and relationships.](image)

1. **Ask** participants to work in groups of three or four.

2. **Distribute** Activity 1.1 (*It’s Just Not the Same*). **Ask** some to read and discuss the Caregiver’s Perspective and others the Family’s Perspective.

3. **Share** this scenario:

   The older parents spent the last 10 winters in the south. They seemed so healthy and happy. This year since they’ve come back, Mom hardly says anything. She’s making a lot of mistakes too, like forgetting things in recipes or calling the grandkids by the wrong names. Dad, whose eyesight is failing, is doing his best to help Mom. There are two adult children, but only one steps up to the plate to check on Dad and Mom. The other adult child has excuses – too far away, too busy, too stressed, too angry. Just this last week the neighbor across the street called daughter (Nancy) because she saw Jane (Mom) outside at 5:30 in the morning in her night gown. She was weeding the front flower bed. It just didn’t make sense. Jane would never go outside in her night clothes.
Caregiver’s Perspective – Dad Ken and Mom Jane
Ken is thinking: Jane and I spent the last 10 winters down south in our dream getaway home. But it is getting to be too much to drive and haul everything back and forth. And besides, many of our winter friends have entered nursing facilities, can’t make the trip, or have died. It just isn’t the same for us anymore. We’re not sure coming back home full-time is the best either.

We are both growing older. My eyesight doesn’t allow me to drive anymore. It is harder for Jane to keep up with everything. When we got married, I vowed to take care of her, and that’s what I’ll do. Lately our youngest, Nancy, has been prying about our health. And we never see our son, Steve, and his family. We don’t like either of the kids telling us what to do. We will be fine on our own.

Jane is thinking: Ken has been hovering lately. I know he is thinking I have “lost my marbles” because I changed some of our favorite recipes. Maybe it is just because I’m getting old. I mean, I can’t seem to remember things as easily as I used to.

Questions from Ken and Jane’s perspective
• What are some of the changes and losses Ken and Jane are facing?
• What feelings might they have about these changes?
• What can stay the same for Ken and Jane?
• What will change for Ken and Jane?

Family’s Perspective – Steve and Nancy
Son Steve is thinking: Nancy is making a big deal out of nothing. Mom was fine when I talked to her last week. When we visit, my wife now has to help out more in the kitchen preparing meals and she doesn’t like that. And it causes tension between my mom and my wife.

Daughter Nancy is thinking: Steve is never around in person so he doesn’t see how Dad is increasingly having to take care of Mom. With Mom’s forgetfulness and Dad’s poor eyesight, I worry about the medications each takes. And I’m pretty angry about always being the one to help my parents out.

Grandkids are thinking: We don’t visit grandma and grandpa as much as we used to. Dad says he is too busy and too far away. Grandma is just not the
same; grandpa keeps telling us to be quiet. It just isn’t any fun anymore. And grandma left the chocolate chips out of our favorite cookies on our last visit.

**Questions from the family’s perspective**

- What are some of the changes or losses these family members are facing?
- What feelings or reactions might they have to these changes?
- What can stay the same for family members?
- What will change for family members?
- Can there be positive outcomes for family members as a result of change?

4. After about five minutes, ask groups to share discussion comments with the whole group. **Record** on newsprint divided into two columns:
   - “Losses and feelings for aging parents in caregiving roles”
   - “Losses and feelings for adult children supporting them”

5. **Share:** Adults in caregiving roles in later life may experience losses and changes. **Ask** the group to list some possible losses for caregivers. Be sure to include these losses:
   - Independence
   - Self-image or identity
   - Routines
   - Companionship
   - Physical health
   - Sense of security
   - Emotional health
   - Isolation
   - Social network
   - Community ties

6. **Share:** We experience changes and losses throughout a lifetime. Some changes are gradual and expected. Some are sudden or unexpected. Some of the feelings these losses may cause can include:
   - Fear and vulnerability
   - Anger and impatience
   - Sadness and depression
   - Worry and anxiety
   - Grief
   - Confusion
7. **Share**: Some changes can seem ambiguous.
   - Family members aren’t sure about what is lost and what remains the same.
   - Uncertainty can be stressful.
   - One way to help deal with the stress is to look for the positive impacts of change.

8. **Ask**: What are some of the positive outcomes of change as we see the caregiver in a caregiving role?
   If desired, suggest these examples:
   - Discussion of plans with a parent can help an adult child know and support the parent at a new level.
   - Time spent helping someone with the basic activities of daily living provides opportunities for sharing stories and experiences.
   - Satisfaction of helping a family member or making decisions together can strengthen family bonds.

9. **Distribute** *Handout 1.1 (It’s Just Not the Same)*. **Summarize** comments.

   Changes in later life can bring:
   - New richness to relationships
   - Different experiences to share
   - Satisfaction of providing support
   - Clearer sense of priorities
   - Compassion for others experiencing loss
   - Appreciation for person in caregiving role

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**Activity – Whose Decision Is It?**

**Share key points:**

- Family decision making is influenced by relationship patterns between the parents and adult children and among the siblings.
- Relationship patterns can change.
- Decision making is influenced by each person’s perceptions about the meaning of change.
- Mentally capable persons not endangering others have a right to make decisions that affect their well-being.
- You can only make changes in your own way of thinking, feeling, or acting.
1. **Distribute** Activity 1.2 (*Whose Decision Is It?*). **Ask** participants as a large group to read the examples and discuss the questions.

### The Move

Joe Simmons and his sister, Jackie, worry about their mom and dad being alone in the farmhouse. Dad is increasingly unsteady on his feet and needs help with taking care of himself. Mom is just a little thing and has her hands full with Dad. Neither Joe nor Jackie live nearby although they visit several times a year.

Joe’s feelings of guilt and his worries about their dad’s safety and mom’s health are interfering with his ability to do his job. Joe thinks their parents should move into an assisted living community. Joe is willing to contribute a little of his own income to make it affordable for their parents.

Jackie is sure their parents will not like the idea since they have clearly said they intend to stay on the farm. But she agrees it is probably best for their dad’s safety and will be easier for their mom.

Joe and Jackie made the down payment and plan to tell their parents that all the arrangements have been made for the move.

- Who has made the decision about where Mom and Dad Simmons will live? Why?
- What are the possible impacts of the decision on Joe and Jackie? On their parents?

### Going to Grandma and Grandpa’s House

Grace Green has always been critical of her daughter, Bev. Howard just goes along with whatever Grace says. Now at 78 years of age, Grace insists that Bev and the grandchildren spend every Sunday at Grace and Howard’s home. She criticizes the work they do for her and complains that they should visit more often during the week.

Bev works at a demanding job. Her children, now in high school, resent being at their grandparents’ all afternoon every Sunday. Bev is worn out and angry with her mother. She is also growing resentful of her Dad and his inability to speak up. Bev knows she should change the routine to fit her schedule better, but it’s easier to just go along with her mother’s demands and avoid being hurt by Grace’s sharp tongue.

- Who makes the decisions about the time Bev spends with her parents?
- What feelings and reactions do Bev, her children, Grace and Howard have about the decisions that have been made?
2. **Introduce** the concept of relationship patterns in families.
   Relationships between parents and their adult children are complex. No two families are exactly the same, but researchers who look at family communication styles have identified several recognizable patterns.

3. **Distribute** *Handout 1.2 (Relationship Patterns).*
   **Describe** the relationship patterns.

   **PARENT/Adult Child Relationship**
   - The parent feels a strong need to control the child.
   - As a parent grows older he may be especially fearful of increasing dependency because he does not trust his child’s ability to support or help him and because he feels he may be losing control in the family.
   - The child may still react as a small child would—fearful of the parent’s disapproval and afraid of not being loved.
   - The adult child may fear making decisions when the parent is no longer in control.

   **ADULT CHILD/Parent Relationship**
   - An adult child may feel her role as a helper for a parent with increasing needs for assistance obligates her to make all the decisions for the parent.
   - Adult children making decisions for the parent may feel resentful of the burden and anxious about the outcome.
   - The parent may feel helpless and marginalized.

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**Caregiver’s Children**

Albert Olson’s stroke left him partially paralyzed, confused, and needing physical therapy twice weekly.

His wife, Lucy, has appreciated the extra help their son and his family give with errands and chores. Frequent visits and calls from their daughter, who lives several hundred miles away, are also a great help. Lucy is worried about how much time her adult children take away from their own jobs and families to help her and Albert.

The children are worried about Lucy. She tells them that for now she and Albert are getting along well and would like to stay in their own home. She recognizes they may need to make some changes in the future. Lucy has taken steps to learn more about a local home nursing service.

- Who should make decisions about the support Lucy and Albert need?
- Who is involved in the decision(s) that have been made so far?
ADULT/ADULT Relationship
- Parents and children see themselves as autonomous adults whose differing needs are equally important.
- They recognize that the decisions made affect all of them.
- They base their relationship on mutual respect as well as obligation.

4. **Remind** participants of the stories they just read. **Ask** which pattern seems to describe:
   - Joe, Jackie, and their parents in “The Move” (ADULT CHILD/Parent)
   - Bev and Grace in “Going to Grandma and Grandpa’s House” (PARENT/Adult Child)
   - Lucy and her children in “Caregiver’s Children” (ADULT/ADULT)

5. **Remind** participants that relationship patterns are based on past history – but that patterns can be changed.
   - Looking at how your family members interrelated in the past helps you have realistic expectations for how you can work and plan together.
   - Relationships can, and do, change over time. Sometimes physical or emotional losses in later life cause a family member to cling to control in a relationship.
   - Sometimes working together on new issues or weathering a crisis together can help family members see each other in new and positive ways.
   - The relationship your siblings have with your parents may differ from the one you have. Differing relationship patterns can cause conflict; or they can be resources for problem solving and decision making because each family member brings unique perceptions to a situation.
   - Family members may relate differently in different situations. Shared history is an important factor.

6. **Discuss** how in ADULT/ADULT relationships family members recognize both the need for autonomy of each member and the interdependence of their relationship.
   - Mentally capable persons not endangering others have a right to make decisions that affect their well-being.
   - You can only make changes in your own way of thinking, feeling, or acting; you cannot change another person.
7. **Share:** Sometimes it is not clear who needs to make decisions. Consider these questions when facing a change in your family.
   1. Is anyone’s safety or health seriously threatened? Whose?
   2. Will the change I think my parent should make benefit me or him/her?
   3. Whose quality of life is impacted? Who should decide what quality of life is acceptable?
   4. What has to change? What could stay the same?

**Activity: Summary**

1. **Distribute** *Handout 1.3 (Understanding Changes in Later-Life Families)* and make the following points.
   - When family members feel their needs and concerns have been recognized, the door is opened for mutual problem solving.
   - Families solve problems in different ways because each family has its own history, values, and perspectives.
   - Preparations for and adjustments to life changes are influenced by each person’s perceptions and feelings about change and loss, attitudes about personal autonomy, and relationship patterns.
   - In ADULT/ADULT relationships, family members recognize both their interdependence and the need for individual autonomy.

2. **Distribute** *Handout 1.4 (Key Points).*
   **Share:** This handout lists the main points we talked about in today’s workshop on changes for adult children and their aging caregiver parent.

This is the first of two sessions on *Caregiving Relationships: Conversations on Aging*. We look forward to seeing you at the second session in this introductory series called *Tools for Talking: Strengthening Later-Life Caregiving Relationships* on:

_________________________ at ______________________

Date/Day Time

in ______________________

Location

The goal for the next session will be to help you build talking and listening skills for addressing changing needs in later life.

**NOTE:** If holding both workshops on same day take a **BREAK** and then go into second topic.

Session 2 of Caregiving Relationships: Conversations on Aging

**Goal**
Help family members build talking and listening skills for addressing changing needs in later life

**Target audience**
Adult children supporting caregiver parents

**Activities**

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<td>Let’s Talk About ...</td>
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<td>Saying What You Mean ...</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hearing What They Say</td>
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<td>Tools to Say What You Mean</td>
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<td>Tools to Hear What They Say</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
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<td>Using the Tools</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tips for Talking About Trying Topics</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
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**Supplies**
Flip chart and markers
Activities: 2.1, 2.2, 2.3
Handouts: 2.1, 2.2, 2.3

**Activity: Let's Talk About ...**

**Share key point:**
- Family history, family roles, fear of changes, embarrassment, or grief are some of the reasons families may find it difficult to talk about and plan for changes in later life.

1. **Introduce** topic. Even though we already have a history of communication with our parents and siblings, it can seem like we’re facing strangers when we want to talk about difficult topics.
2. **Distribute** Activity 2.1 (Let’s Talk About ...). **Ask** someone to read Example A aloud.

**Example A**  
My folks don’t like to talk about the future, but they are increasingly frail. I’m worried about them and how they will take care of themselves. The other day I found that they’ve been eating most of their meals at the fast food restaurant. I know Mom’s blood pressure is high and all that salt can’t be good for either of them. When I asked her about it she just said, “It’s nice to go out.”

**Questions from the adult child’s perspective**  
Ask participants to respond. In this situation …  
- What do you wish you could talk about with your parents?  
- Why are those issues important to you?  
- Why are they so hard to talk about?

**Ask** someone to read Example B aloud.

**Example B**  
We’ve been thinking a lot about our health and the future these days. We’re only 70, but my husband struggles with a heart condition. I guess we should have talked with our children more about their dad’s health. When I told my daughter I’d be interested in living near her and the grandchildren if something happened to Dad she said, “Oh Mom, don’t be silly. You and Dad are young. It’s morbid to talk about dying.”

**Questions from the parent/caregiver perspective**  
Ask participants to respond. In this situation …  
- What do you think your parent would like to talk about with you?  
- Why is it important to them?  
- Why is it so hard to talk about?

3. **Ask:** What are some possible reasons why family members have difficulty talking about change? **Record** on newsprint.  
Ideas:  
- Grief or embarrassment  
- Denial of loss  
- Uncertainty or confusion  
- Desire to protect others  
- Family history
Activity: Saying What You Mean ... Hearing What They Say

Share key point:

When families bring up sensitive issues, problem solving may be blocked because individuals can’t express their real concerns or don’t hear the concerns of others.

1. **Share:** We’re going to eavesdrop on a mother/daughter conversation. It is late afternoon and the daughter stopped at her parents’ house for a quick visit. She’s been worried about their health. It’s about time for her to leave but she’s noticed her mom is moving slowly and seems very tired. Her dad hasn’t participated in any of the conversations.

2. **Ask** for two volunteers to read Script A from Activity 2.2 (Mother/Daughter Conversation).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Script A</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Daughter:</strong> Mom, you look terrible. Are you sick?</td>
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<td><strong>Mother:</strong> (quickly annoyed) Of course not. I just didn’t get my nap in after lunch because I was waiting for a package in the mail. The mailman was late.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Daughter:</strong> (worried and frustrated) Well, it’s late. I have to get going and you need to fix supper.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mother:</strong> Oh, we’ll just go over to the EatMore tonight.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Daughter:</strong> (horrified) Mom, you can’t keep eating all that salt! EatMore’s is the worst place in the world for a high blood pressure diet. I’ll just go get you something healthier at the store.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mother:</strong> No dear. You go on home. Dad likes those Super Burgers and it’s nice not to cook.</td>
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**Ask:**
- What did the daughter hope to accomplish in this conversation? Did it happen?
- What does she know about her parents’ situation that she didn’t know before?
- How might the mother be feeling as the daughter leaves?
3. **Ask** for two volunteers to read Script B from *Activity 2.2 (Mother/Daughter Conversation)*. Let’s listen again.

**Script B**

**Daughter:** Mom, I’ve been noticing this afternoon that you seem extra tired. That worries me.

**Mother:** Oh, I’m fine dear. (pause …) I haven’t been sleeping too well, I guess.

**Daughter:** I get frustrated when I can’t sleep. Any ideas about what is keeping you awake?

**Mother:** It is probably that new medication. I’ll get used to it. And then your Dad is so restless that I stay awake to be sure he’s OK.

**Daughter:** I didn’t think about that. Let’s see … you said you had a doctor’s appointment next week; maybe you can ask him about the medicine then. Well, it’s getting late. I should be on my way so you can fix your supper.

**Mother:** Oh, we’ll just go over to EatMore tonight.

**Daughter:** You’re really enjoying those big burgers, I guess!

**Mother:** Well, I’d rather stay here, but it’s the only way I can get your dad to eat. I’m really worried about him.

**Ask:**

- What was different in this conversation?
  
  Ideas: *Daughter’s approach: not telling Mother what to do, no accusing, expressing her own feelings (that worries me), acknowledging mother’s competency (you’ll talk to the doctor).*

- What were the results? What could happen next?
  
  Ideas: *The conversation led to a new topic (father is not sleeping and his health) plus a probability for continued discussion.*
4. **Share:** Even with good intentions, we may put roadblocks in our conversations with family members that prevent moving on to further discussion. Communication barriers block decisions.
   - Hide or withhold information
   - Give opinions even when NOT asked
   - Tell others what they should do
   - Make decisions for family members who are capable of making their own decisions

5. **Share:** Some communication patterns serve as bridges opening up paths to problem solving and understanding.
Communication bridges lead to decisions.
   - Share information
   - Ask for information
   - Offer opinions only when asked
   - Listen actively and effectively
   - Make decisions with – not for – family members

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**Activity: Tools to Say What You Mean**

1. **Introduce** topic. Crossing the bridge from “everyday conversation” to “important discussion” can seem like an impossible task. However, there are some communication tools that can help.

   **Share key point:**
   
   When you talk about how a situation affects you, without telling the other person what he/she must do, you allow the other person to give you new information or help you see the situation differently.

2. **Explain** further:
   In the first role play the daughter jumped quickly to her solution for her mom, not because she was bossy or insensitive, but probably because she was really concerned. Her mom didn’t have a chance to share any new information.

   In the second role play, the daughter did talk about a specific reason for her own concern, but she also listened for her mother’s solutions and, as a result, learned about her mother’s worries.
3. **Distribute Handout 2.1 (Tools for Talking).**
   “I” statements are a tool to help you say what you mean.

   An “I” statement expresses how a situation affects you without telling the other person what he/she must do. We express how we feel without blaming or accusing the other person. When using “I” statements we are careful not to say how the other person makes us feel.

4. **Review** how to make an “I” statement and how **not** to make an “I” statement.

   **Ask:** How could the daughter in the first conversation use “I” statements to express her concern?
   
   … to show what she felt and why
   … to clarify or explain her feelings

   **Ideas:**
   
   “Mom, I’m really worried.”
   “I’m wondering if you’ve not been feeling up to cooking.”
   “I need to know you are both OK.”
   “I would like to share some of the cooking duties.”
   “I’ve noticed both of you seem pretty tired.”
   “I want to talk about how I can help.”

5. **Continue** the discussion.
   
   - “I” statements require an attitude of wanting to engage in problem solving rather than an attitude of knowing the answer.
   
   - “I” statements clarify YOUR feelings and goals. By stating them as “yours,” the other person can feel free to disagree and share his/her perceptions of the situation.
   
   - “I” statements are **NOT** magic. Using them won’t force someone else to share his/her thoughts.
   
   - “I” statements are **NOT** intended to be used as a way to force your solutions on someone else. Be careful in using the word “you.” It can easily turn an “I” statement into a blaming or accusatory statement.
Activity: Tools to Hear What They Say

1. **Introduce** topic. “I” statements are a communication tool that helps you say what you mean. But what about the other part of communication – listening? When you focus on listening actively and effectively, you also help build a bridge toward more meaningful conversations.

**Share key points:**
- When you listen well to another person, you hear his/her words and you also remember how losses, fears, embarrassment, or other feelings may influence the words.
- Active and effective listening also means noticing what someone doesn’t say.

2. **Discuss** active listening. **Refer** to *Handout 2.1 (Tools for Talking)*.
   - **Active listening:**
     - Helps you “hear” both words and feelings
     - Shows empathy (I accept you as you are. I’m trying to understand your concerns.)
     - Helps clarify thoughts and feelings

3. **Refer** participants to *Activity 2.1 (Let’s Talk About …)*.
   - What are the feelings behind the mother’s words, “If anything happened to Dad, I’d want to come and live near you and my grandchildren.”?
     - (uncertainty, fear, willingness to plan ahead)

   The adult child in the example has some feelings, too. She may be unable to face the thought of losing a parent. She may think it is best to give her mother encouragement. Or, she may not realize the seriousness of her father’s health condition.

4. **Continue** the discussion of active listening techniques.
   - As a listener, how do you show acceptance?
     - Through verbal means …
       - by naming the feelings you hear
     - Through non-verbal means …
       - by being attentive, showing expression

   - As a listener, how can you help clarify what you hear?
     - Check perceptions by restating or paraphrasing
5. **Refer** participants to *Activity 2.1 (Let’s Talk About …)*.

**Ask:** What could the adult child say to help clarify or show acceptance when the mother mentioned her plans for moving nearer?

“**It sounds like you’ve been doing some thinking about how things would be without Dad. Can you tell me more about what you’ve thought about?**”

(acceptance, checking perceptions)

“**You sound a little worried. Tell me more about what’s been on your mind.**”

(encouraging, checking out, restating feelings)

“**That’s an interesting thought. It’s really hard for me to think about Dad dying (“I” message), and we’ve never really talked about it. Do you want to talk more?**”

(checking out, opening the door)

All these responses show that you respect what the other person is saying. They are bridges that encourage further communication.

6. **Explain:** Active listening is a tool for effective listening. To be an effective listener there are other things to remember.

- One part of effective listening is remembering that a person has the right to make decisions about his/her own life.
- You need to be clear about what you can and can’t do.
- You need to try to show that you understand and appreciate what the other person can and can’t do.
- When you listen effectively, you recognize old patterns and don’t expect to change them.
- Best of all, when you practice effective listening, you lay the groundwork for future problem-solving conversations.
Activity: Using the Tools

Share key points:

- In any relationship you can only make changes in your own way of thinking, feeling, or acting. You cannot change another person without his/her willingness to change.

- Each family member has needs, wishes, and the right to make decisions about his/her own life. By being clear about what you can and cannot do, you act as an adult. By trying to understand and appreciate what your parent can or cannot do, you treat him/her as an adult.

1. **Introduce** topic. Role playing is a way to practice using the communication tools we’ve just talked about.

2. **Ask** participants to form groups of four. Explain that each pair will have a chance to be a talker and a listener while the other pair observes.

3. **Give** each group two pairs of Activity 2.3 (Talker/Listener Role Plays). There are three sets of role plays to choose from for each group of four. Remind the “talkers” and “listeners” to use the skills previously discussed. Remind the “observers” to think about what they see and hear that works well. Signal the first pair to start a conversation while the second pair observes. Stop the groups after 3-4 minutes. Then let the second pair talk/listen while the first pair observes. Stop the groups after 3-4 minutes.

**Talker A**

You have been thinking a lot about your health and future lately. Your husband has struggled with a heart condition for years, but doesn’t talk about it much to the family. You want to tell your adult daughter that you’d be interested in living near her and the grandchildren if something happened to your husband.

**Listener A**

Your mom is telling you about her health concerns and plans for what would happen if your dad died. You hate talking about these things. You are busy with work and family right now and your parents still seem young. Somehow it seems morbid to talk about dying, but you know this is important to her. **Your goal for listening is to find out what plans she really wants to make.**
**Talker B**
Your dad has had several falls over the last year. He is a big man and your mom can barely handle getting him up. They live in a house with a basement and upstairs. The laundry room is in the basement and the bedroom is upstairs. You would like your parents to consider moving to the assisted living apartments in town where they could have everything on one level and have help with meals and housekeeping. You are talking to your brother, who hasn’t visited your parents for a long time, about your concerns.

**Listener B**
Your brother is talking about how well dad and mom are getting along. He doesn’t think there are any problems with the current housing situation. You’re not sure you agree. *Your goal for listening is to find out why your brother is so convinced your parents should continue living in the house.*

**Talker C**
Your parents are in good health but seem to be spending an awful lot of money. They buy expensive gifts for the grandchildren, have taken several expensive trips, put an addition on the house, and purchased an RV. You are pretty sure they haven’t ever had a lot of extra money. You’ve decided to ask your parents about their future plans. Do they have a will? What do you want to do if one or both of them needs long-term care assistance? How good is their insurance?

**Listener C**
Your son wants to talk to you about your finances. You and your spouse have always kept money discussions private. Yet you think you should at least hear what he has to say. *Your goal for listening is to find out why he is concerned and what he thinks you should do.*

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4. **Ask:**
   - What was the most difficult in trying out the listening skills?
   - How did you show the other person you were willing to listen?
   - What is hardest about making an “I” statement?

5. **Review** effective listening and “I” statements.
   Listening effectively is based on respect for a person’s right to make decisions about his/her life. In any relationships you can only make changes in your own way of thinking, feeling, or acting. You cannot change another person without his/her willingness to change.
Each family member has needs and wishes. By being clear about what you can and cannot do, you act as an adult. By trying to understand and appreciate what your parent can or cannot do, you treat him/her as an adult.

New communication tools won’t necessarily change old patterns of relating or resolving problems. But when you listen carefully to the feelings behind a statement, speak clearly about your own concerns, and share information with each other, you lay the groundwork for future problem-solving discussions.

In relationships between adult children and their parents, both need to be able to say what they need and feel with the understanding that the other may not agree.

Activity: Tips for Talking About Trying Topics

**Share key point:**

- As with any successful negotiation, sensitive discussions can be influenced by individual preparation, timing, and follow-up.

1. **Introduce** topic. We’ve practiced some talking and listening techniques that can help encourage the kinds of conversations that strengthen family relationships. But as with any successful negotiation, sensitive discussions can be influenced by other factors.

   Ask participants for examples of sensitive topics and for tips on handling those conversations.

2. **Summarize** using *Handout 2.2 (Talking About Trying Topics)* and distribute copies.

   **Think through the issue; plan your approach.**
   Clarifying for yourself what your concerns are can make you more comfortable, and help you practice what you might say. Think about why the issue is difficult for you and for your parent.

   **Be responsible for your own concerns.**
   Talk about how a situation affects you. Don’t tell the other person what he/she must do.
Write a letter or list to discuss.
Writing your thoughts down can help you sort them out, but giving that list to someone else might not always be the best approach. Some people are less defensive if they can first react to written communication in private and at their leisure. Others might feel threatened or react defensively because they are more accustomed to talking things out.

Emphasize independence.
New ideas are almost always easier to accept if they bring a real benefit. For example, “Having the visiting nurse stop by twice a month would save you having to make so many doctor’s appointments,” or “This cell phone would mean you could keep taking your long walks alone.”

Keep an open mind.
Remember, you cannot change another person without his/her willingness to change. You can only make changes in your own way of thinking, feeling, or acting.

3. Continue summary with more tips from Handout 2.2 (Talking About Trying Topics).

Start small; don’t push the issue.
Change is difficult. People can’t deal with too many new ideas at one time. Don’t introduce difficult topics when there is already a crisis. Try to choose times when you aren’t tired or hurried. Think about possible distractions.

Use natural openers.
Sometimes issues arise naturally. Example: a family friend is moving to another home; a relative is sick and needs assistance; you and your mom are cleaning house and she mentions how good it is to have help.

Try a “news hook.”
Sometimes it is easier to talk about things indirectly. Mention something you and a friend talked about, an article, an experience you’ve had, and use it to ask a question: “I heard something on TV last week that got me thinking. Have you and Dad ever heard of an advance directive for health care?” or, “Bob and I are working on designating power of attorney. How have you handled that?”
Back off; try another time.
If a person isn’t ready to talk, be patient. Sometimes we need time to gather thoughts and information before we can return to the topic. Thinking time is productive time.

Revisit big decisions.
Difficult topics can’t be resolved in one discussion. Example: “I’m glad I know what you think about this. Let’s talk more in a couple of weeks when I come back.”

Enlist those with “listening leverage.”
Sometimes another person can talk more easily, and more effectively, about a situation and your concern. Because you have a particular role in your family, a doctor, peer, or friend may be in a better (neutral) position to bring up a difficult issue such as hiring in-home help. Who else might your parent listen to without feeling so threatened?

Activity: Summary
1. Distribute Handout 2.3 (Key Points) and make the following points.
   - It is never too early, or too late, to practice using communication tools like “I” statements and active listening skills.
   - Each family member has needs, wishes, and the right to control his/her own life.
   - You can encourage meaningful conversations by being clear about what you can and cannot do, and by trying to understand and appreciate what your parent(s) can or cannot do.
   - Identifying your concerns and preparing for sensitive discussions can make your time together more productive.

2. Share: These two sessions on Caregiving Relationships: Conversations on Aging are just the beginning. One way you can support a caregiving parent is to encourage him/her to attend Powerful Tools for Caregivers. This is a class designed to provide the family caregiver with the skills needed to take care of him/herself. Participants learn to: reduce stress; improve self-confidence; balance their lives; better communicate feelings; increase ability to make tough decisions; and locate helpful resources.

3. Distribute brochure for upcoming Powerful Tools for Caregivers class in the community.