SUPPORT FOR FAMILY CARERS

Talking to a parent about care: how to start and what to say

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IN BRIEF

Start early, before a crisis, and start by listening: ask what matters most to your parent and what they find hard, rather than arriving with a plan. An adult who can make the decision has the right to say no, even if you think it is unwise, so the aim is a choice they own, often reached over several conversations. If they cannot make the decision, or are at risk of harm, the law gives other routes.



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Most families put this conversation off because they fear upsetting someone they love. Yet parents often feel relieved once it starts, and an early, unhurried talk gives them far more say than a rushed decision made in a hospital corridor.

Before you start: prepare

- **Be specific about what you have noticed.** "You're not coping" invites an argument; "I noticed the fridge was nearly empty twice this month" invites a conversation. Our guide to signs an older person needs more help can help you put words to your worries.
- **Know the options.** Your parent may assume "care" means a care home. Read about the types of care at home, from a few visits a week to a live-in carer, so you can describe real choices.
- **Have a rough idea of cost and help.** "How much will it cost?" is often the first question. Attendance Allowance is not means-tested, and the council's needs assessment is free. See how to reduce the cost of care.
- **Talk to brothers and sisters first.** Agree what you want to achieve, not the answer.
- **Choose the moment.** Pick a calm time, in private, with no rush: not at a family celebration, late in the evening or straight after a fall. Make sure hearing aids are in and glasses are on. For someone living with dementia, choose their best time of day.
- **Keep it small.** One or two people, not a family panel. Sometimes a trusted friend, the GP or a faith leader will be heard more easily than a son or daughter.

How to start the conversation

Begin with questions, and listen more than you speak.

- Ask what matters most: their home, the garden, the dog, church, their independence, not being "a burden".
- Ask what they find hard, and what they would change if they could.
- Link any help to what they value: "help with the heavy jobs so you can keep doing the things you enjoy".
- Offer choices, not instructions, and let them set the pace.
- Expect more than one conversation. Agree a small next step and a time to talk again.

Gentle scripts you can use

Adapt these to your own words.

Opening the subject

> "Mum, I've been thinking about how things are going at home, and I'd love to hear how it feels from your side. Is there anything that's become more of a struggle lately?"

When they say "I'm fine"

> "I'm glad, and I don't want to take over. I just noticed you've stopped going upstairs to bed. Can we think together about what would make that easier?"

Making it about you (often true)

> "I worry about you when I'm at work, and it would help me sleep at night to know someone pops in. Would you try it for a month, for me?"

About strangers in the house

> "You'd meet them first, and if you don't get on, we'd ask for someone else. You'd be in charge of how things are done."

About money

> "Let's find out what help you're entitled to before we worry about cost. There are benefits you've paid in for that aren't based on savings."

About fears of a care home

> "Nobody is talking about you leaving home. This is about what would help you stay here safely, for as long as possible."

About live-in care

> “Some people have one carer who lives here with you, so there’s someone close by, day and night, and you’d keep your own routine and your own things.”

Ending kindly

> “Thank you for talking about this. You don’t need to decide anything today. Shall we talk again next weekend?”

Respecting their choices and capacity



The Mental Capacity Act 2005 starts from respect. Everyone must be assumed to have capacity unless it is shown otherwise, people must be helped to make their own decisions, and nobody should be treated as lacking capacity just because they make a choice others think is unwise.

Capacity is about a particular decision at a particular time. Your father may be perfectly able to decide whether to have a cleaner, yet unable to understand the risks of living alone if his dementia is advanced. You can help him decide by giving information simply, a little at a time, with pictures or written notes, at his best time of day.

If a professional assesses that your parent cannot make a specific decision, it must be made in their **best interests**, taking account of their wishes, feelings, beliefs and values, and choosing the least restrictive option. The views of family and carers should be sought where practical. A Lasting Power of Attorney for health and welfare lets someone they chose make these decisions, but only once they lack

capacity. Read our guides to mental capacity and best interests and Lasting Power of Attorney. While your parent can still make one, an LPA is one of the kindest things to suggest.

When they say no

- **Fear of losing independence.** Explain that good care supports what they can do, rather than doing everything for them.
- **Fear of strangers.** Suggest meeting the carer first, asking for the same small team, or one regular live-in carer they can get to know.
- **Worry about cost.** Offer a benefits check and the free council assessment.
- **Embarrassment about personal care.** Start with shopping, cleaning or meals, and ask whether they would prefer a male or female carer.
- **Not noticing the problem.** Memory problems can make it hard for someone to see what has changed. A GP check is a gentle next step.

Practical ways forward:

1. **Start small.** A weekly cleaner or meal delivery can open the door to more.
2. **Try a trial.** "Let's try it for four weeks and then decide together."
3. **Use a break.** A short respite stay or respite live-in care can be framed as a break for the family carer.
4. **Bring in a professional.** The GP, an occupational therapist or a social worker can explain options without family history in the way.
5. **Agree a review point.** "If you have another fall, can we look at this again?"

Meanwhile, reduce risks in ways they accept: a personal alarm, a key safe, a hot meal service, regular phone calls. Keep visiting, and keep a dated note of what you see.

If you are worried about their safety

An adult with capacity can refuse a council needs assessment. Under section 11 of the Care Act 2014, the council must still assess if the person lacks capacity to refuse and an assessment would be in their best interests, or if they are experiencing, or at risk of, abuse or neglect. Neglect includes self-neglect, such as not eating, living in unsafe conditions or refusing essential care.

If you are worried, call the council's adult social care team and explain what you have seen. In Oxfordshire, call 01865 519800 (Monday to Thursday 8.30am to 5pm, Friday 8.30am to 4pm); out of hours, the Emergency Duty Team is on 0800 833 408. If someone is in immediate danger, call 999. Our guide to safeguarding and scams explains what happens next.

Things to avoid

- Ultimatums, or talking about your parent as if they are not in the room.
- Several relatives arguing the same point at once.
- Promises you may not be able to keep, such as "you'll never have to leave this house".
- Arranging care behind their back. It can damage trust for years.
- Expecting one conversation to settle it.

If your parent has dementia, the Admiral Nurse Dementia Helpline (0800 888 6678; Monday to Friday 9am to 9pm, weekends 9am to 5pm) offers specialist advice on difficult conversations. The Age UK Advice Line is on 0800 678 1602, 8am to 7pm every day.

What to do next

1. Write down what you have noticed, with dates.
2. Talk to brothers and sisters about the aim of the conversation.
3. Read up on the options and costs so you can answer questions.
4. Choose a calm moment, start with questions, and agree one small step.
5. Suggest a free council needs assessment, and a GP check if anything has changed suddenly.
6. Raise a Lasting Power of Attorney while your parent can still make one.

How we can help

Day and Nightcare has supported older people and their families at home since 2008. If it would help, we can visit for a free initial assessment, where your parent can ask their own questions and stay in charge of the decision. We offer home care visits across Oxfordshire and fully managed live-in care anywhere in England, from £1,550 a week. Call us on 01865 715780, with or without your parent beside you.

Common questions

Can I make my mum or dad accept care?

No, not if they have the mental capacity to make that decision. Adults are allowed to make choices others think are unwise, including refusing help. What you can do is keep talking, offer small steps, and make sure they know what help exists. If they lack capacity to decide, a decision can be made in their best interests. If they are at risk of abuse or neglect, including self-neglect, the council can get involved even if they refuse.

Can I ask for a care needs assessment without telling my parent?

You can contact the council to share your worries, and anyone can ask for a needs assessment. But an adult with capacity can refuse the assessment itself, and it works far better with their agreement. Tell your parent you would like to ask and explain why. The council must still assess if they lack capacity to refuse and an assessment is in their best interests, or if they are at risk of abuse or neglect.

What if my brothers and sisters disagree?

Talk with each other before you talk to your parent, so the conversation is not a family argument in front of them. Agree what you have each noticed and what you want to achieve, not the exact answer. Decide who is best placed to start the conversation. If you still disagree, a GP, social worker or independent advocate can help focus everyone on what your parent wants. Remember the decision is theirs if they have capacity.

Should the GP be involved?

Often, yes. Many older people listen to their GP more readily than to their children, and the GP can check for treatable causes of new problems, such as an infection, a medicine side effect or low mood. With your parent's agreement, you can go with them to an appointment or write to the GP beforehand. The GP will not share details with you without your parent's consent, but they can always listen to your concerns.

Sources and further information

- NHS: Mental Capacity Act
- GOV.UK: Mental Capacity Act Code of Practice

- legislation.gov.uk: Care Act 2014, section 11 (refusal of assessment)
- NHS: Getting a needs assessment
- Independent Age: Talking about getting extra help at home
- Dementia UK: Admiral Nurse Dementia Helpline

Read next

CHOOSING LIVE-IN CARE

Signs an older person needs more help, and what to do about each

Practical warning signs that an older parent or relative needs more help at home, from weight loss and missed medicines to unopened post, falls and sudden confusion, with what to do about each, who to call, and a one-week checklist to print. England.

Read the guide →

LEGAL MATTERS AND PLANNING AHEAD

Mental capacity and best interests: a guide for families

How the Mental Capacity Act 2005 works in England and Wales: the five principles, how capacity is assessed, best interests decisions, deprivation of liberty after the 2026 Supreme Court ruling, the position on LPS, and how to support someone to decide.

Read the guide →

CHOOSING LIVE-IN CARE

Types of care at home: live-in, visiting, night and respite care

The types of care at home in England explained simply: live-in care, visiting home care, sitting and companionship, waking nights and sleep-ins, 24-hour care, respite, reablement, Discharge to Assess and palliative care, who each suits and how to combine them.

Read the guide →

All guides in the information centre Check what help you could get

Talk to our care team: 01865 715780
enquiries@dayandnightcare.co.uk · Out of hours: 07775 686272
Day and Nightcare Live In Limited, 9 Hollow Way, Cowley, Oxford OX4 2NA
CQC overall rating: Good (report published 20 April 2018)

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Information, not advice: please check anything important with the organisation named.