

# How to Navigate Health Conversations with Aging Parents



Initiating and navigating health conversations with aging parents, while very necessary, can be extremely difficult. Our experts at Christian Health weighed in to provide practical guidance on how to navigate these important, but often contentious conversations.



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Health conversations are fraught with worry, from all parties. We're worried about our parents' well-being. Our parents are worried about losing the home they've built, and their independence. They may also be worried about admitting concerns about their own well-being because they don't want to trouble their children.

### So how do you counteract worry in these kinds of conversations?

**Start early.** Every parent has different needs — one parent may want to stay in their home and look into Home Care Options, while another would prefer not to worry about the maintenance of their home and look into assisted living. When you have these conversations with each parent early, you can better understand each of their needs. Remind them, “We can have a plan, or we can have a crisis. Having a plan will put me at ease.”

**Plan and speak frequently with family members.** Parents often have different relationships with each of their children, and therefore may have different conversations about their future. Write down your notes and conversations with your parents about what they would want and frequently communicate with your siblings to ensure everyone is on the same page when the time comes to make those decisions.

**Keep the initial conversation as an introduction to the topic.** The first conversation does not need to result in establishing an end goal for their future care. Start by leading into the conversation softly and then offer some information that may result in more questions later on. For example, “I read an article today and this was interesting to me. I’m going to leave it with you and we can talk about it next time.” This soft introduction may help your parent feel more comfortable and receptive to having the conversation with you.

Sometimes parents will assume the worst about our intentions when we come to them with a concern about their health. “You just want to put me in a home!”

### So how can we help parents genuinely understand where we're coming from?

**Come from a place of safety.** Pose the question to your parents of what their plans are for dealing with things like stairs, going out for groceries, etc. Then, you can discuss a solution that they would be comfortable with. When you have an honest conversation with a concentration on safety with a resolution, you can come to terms with what is most important to your parents and help them understand where you're coming from.

**Ask your parents what their quality of life means to them.** For example, if the most important thing for them is to stay in their home, there are resources available to make sure they can do that in a safe way. This will help them understand that you genuinely want to find a solution that aligns with their wishes.

Every parent/child relationship is different,  
and every parent's health needs are different.

Are there some recommendations of what NOT to do or "ground rules" that we should make sure to never violate?

**Don't argue.** Don't communicate from a place of frustration or anger; you'll be much more effective if you communicate from a place of respect. Arguing with your aging parent will only cause stress and will be unproductive.

**Don't correct them or question their memory.** As we all age, we start to develop different memory issues to different extents. If your mom says, "There's an elephant in the room," you don't say, "No Mom, there's no elephant." You would say, "Where is it going?" or "What color is it?" Start the conversation where they are and you will have a much more relaxed conversation. Provide empathy and be able to listen to what they have to say.

**Don't have the discussion immediately during or after an incident, like a fall.** Let the dust settle before you approach your parent to discuss what the next steps are. Empathize, show compassion, and then come up with a plan. Honor their wishes and respect and listen to what they are saying.

**Don't assume or insist upon a solution for your parent.** Often adult children want to use words like "nursing home" or "assisted living" without fully knowing what those terms mean and how they're different. Let the professionals explain what their options are, how they differ, and what the best option would be for their situation.

## Meet the Experts

### **Ellen DeBel, RN-BC, C-AL, CDP** Executive Director of The Vista

Ellen DeBel has worked at Christian Health for over 40 years. She served as the wellness coordinator at The Vista before her promotion to executive director. As executive director, she is responsible for the oversight of all areas of The Vista, including sales and operations, with a strong emphasis on resident satisfaction.

### **Teresa Durantino, MSW, LSW, CDP** Director of Social Services at Heritage Manor and Southgate Special Care

Teresa Durantino has been at Christian Health since 2006. She oversees the daily operations of Bolger Short-Term Rehab, Heritage Manor, and Southgate Special Care, helping residents and patients with discharge planning and exploring options such as assisted living, independent living, and community resources.

### **Myrna M. Gomez, LCSW, LNHA** Executive Director and Administrator of Heritage Manor and Southgate Special Care

Myrna M. Gomez oversees the operations of subacute patients, custodial needs of long-term-care residents, and behavioral-care needs of a special-care patient population. She is also the primary caregiver of her 82-year-old mother, who lives with her in her home in Bergen County, New Jersey.



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