

# The 70-40 Rule: Helping Aging Parents Communicate with their Adult Children

The **70-40 rule** is a guideline — if you're at least 70 or your adult children are at least 40, it's time to start a discussion about some of the more sensitive issues.

As you age, there are often times when you will have to have discussions about sensitive topics with your adult children. These conversations do not have to be uncomfortable or tense. Consider the following tips on how to approach sensitive topics.

## Eight tips to help aging parents communicate with their adult children

- 1. Be assertive if needed...** There will be situations where people talk to you in ways that may be inappropriate. Assertiveness involves figuring out what you need in a specific situation, stating that clearly and definitively so that the other person can't fail to understand. Then don't allow the conversation to be sidetracked onto other issues.
- 2. ...Not aggressive.** Aggressive communication may include personal attacks on another person. Such attacks are unlikely to be helpful and will likely reinforce someone else's negative perception of you. When the focus becomes the other person, you've lost the ability to talk about what you want to talk about.
- 3. Be selective.** Pick your battles. In some circumstances it may be easier to walk away or go along with something. You can't fight every battle or you'll exhaust yourself and potentially alienate those around you. Save the assertive behaviour for the situations where it is most important; that will also make it more effective.
- 4. Make the most of your energy.** Look for the places and times in which you are most effective in getting what you need out of conversations and plan to have important conversations at those places and times. If you're more aware and can think better in the mornings, then arrange for meetings at that time so that you're likely to get the most out of them.
- 5. Raise the issue.** Often there are issues that everyone knows are out there. Consider what your child might want to know, and if you have the opportunity to raise the issue, do it. A child may find it difficult to talk about a will. However, it's relatively straightforward for you to mention to your child that you have one and it's all in order. If the topic is a difficult one, it is often helpful to "set the stage" by prefacing a conversation with "I want to talk to you about something..."
- 6. Defend without defensiveness.** Your adult child may come to you with what seems to be an accusation—perhaps it seems like your child is saying that you're not safe to drive anymore. Think about how to defend against this without defensiveness. Conflict and anger rarely change minds, but frank and constructive discussions can. Offer to take a driving test or a defensive driving course to demonstrate your competence. Looking for places where you are comfortable meeting someone halfway will increase your chances of getting your own way on the issues most important to you.

7. **Look for points of agreement.** Even if you disagree with 90 percent of what someone is saying, don't forget to point out where you do agree: common ground is a good starting point for resolving problems. Talking about where you agree also demonstrates that you've listened carefully to what the other person is saying.
8. **Listen and put yourself in your children's situation.** When adult children come to you with an issue, it's normally because they're concerned and because they care. Even if you don't like what they have to say, appreciate why they are saying it. Be frank with yourself about your limitations; remember feelings

you had for your parents when you were younger, and think about the trouble you might have had in raising difficult issues with them. Your child is feeling that same anxiety, so even if you disagree, look for ways to express your appreciation for their motivation. "I know you're saying this because you care about me." Expressing gratitude, care, love and appreciation demonstrates your desire to maintain a positive relationship, no matter what the outcome of the current conversation.

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