

Mom
said
what?

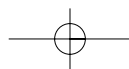
**communicating
with mom
and dad**

WRITTEN BY
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IN THE MIDDLE OF A RECENT SPEECH ON COMMUNICATING with our aging parents, a woman raised her hand. "I'm 55 years old," she said, "and my mother still pushes my emotional buttons. Before heading to work, I stopped at her house. When Mom answered the door, the first thing she said was, 'Are you wearing that to work?'"

And—you guessed it—this otherwise confident and competent woman publicly admitted she went home and changed clothes.

Most of my audience laughed, but it wasn't all comfortable laughter, by any means. "Been there, done that," you could almost hear people thinking. Some in the audience may have cringed, though, recalling a time they delivered such a greeting. And maybe a few resolved not to do the same thing to their children when the opportunity presents itself someday—as it no doubt will.





But the point is, when we need to engage in sensitive subjects with our aging parents, we can stumble into a lot of emotional baggage stacked up by the door.

Talking with Mom and Dad

As our parents age, we often find ourselves called upon to provide care, support, and often initiative in their lives, and it's not uncommon to run smack into the wall of our past relationships and how they shaped our style of communicating. Remember how frustrated your parents could make you 30 years ago? Remember bickering over everything from clothes and hairstyles to career and lifestyle choices? Is it time for the sequel?

Not necessarily.

The time to break the pattern and start a new one is as soon as you notice it. Think back. What kind of communication did you have with your parents when you were growing up? Remember times, like family meals, when conversation was an important part of what was going on. Were they uncomfortable occasions—full of contention and criticism—or a nonjudgmental time to share the day's events? Was it easy to talk with your folks about uncomfortable issues (like dating ...

or, gasp, sex), or did you have stoic, polite conversations about, well, nothing?

Surprise! Communication doesn't magically become better with time, especially if you haven't had much reason to practice with each other in recent years. If you've had issues before, expect them to return, even increase, as your parents age—especially if physical, emotional, or cognitive issues are becoming of greater concern for them.

Don't be surprised if you wind up feeling like someone who hasn't been on a tennis court in a couple of decades: awkward, uncoordinated, and very quickly winded by the unaccustomed exercise.

I can't ask my child for advice

For whatever it's worth, you're not alone. Your parents probably are equally out of shape for the game of talking tennis. Even without the baggage, most adults aren't used to, let alone comfortable with, coming to their children for help. For our parents, giving up control of even minor parts of their lives—let alone deeply personal and important issues—can feel like a sign of weakness, an admission of failure or decline.

So it's not only your communication

style at issue. If they haven't learned better habits since the last time you talked about serious subjects, the way your parents ask for help can come out anywhere from awkward to horrible. Sometimes, they're simply trying to say, "I'm lonely or bored or angry." But what you may hear is, "Why don't you do more for me?" "I'm disappointed in my family." "I'm mad ... at you."

Most of us listen "autobiographically"—we relate everything we hear to our own world. Try tuning in from your parent's side and listen "empathetically" instead. Use the skills you've learned in your own life, from work to family, to separate what's actually being said, however awkwardly, from how it's coming out. Then ignore the latter and engage the former.

Just like tennis, the more you play this game, the sooner you'll start feeling coordinated and fit for it.)))

Kari Berit, author of *The Unexpected Caregiver: How Boomers Can Keep Mom & Dad Active, Safe and Independent*, helps seniors and their adult children create effective dialogue around things that matter. Visit www.kariberit.com.

