The Conversation

By Christopher Lyboldt, CDP

I remember when I got nervous about my Father-in-Law, Bob, living alone. There were signs that things were changing. Some were relatively minor, like the pile of unopened mail on his dining room table and the untidiness of his usually tidy home. Other signs were emotional. A social butterfly his entire life, he began to retreat into isolation, and we were concerned that he was lonely and a bit depressed even. Other signs were more concerning, like a hospital visit for a fall. My wife and I became concerned about his safety and his emotional well-being. But, sharing our thoughts about "a transition" with fiercely independent Bob was not a conversation we looked forward to. But, we got through it, and luckily for all of us, he thrived in his new home.

My wife and I own Senior Care Authority Atlanta, and we advise families that have an older adult in their life that needs some help. We coach families about "The Conversation," during which concerns are voiced to an older adult by a younger loved one about transitioning to senior living or bringing in a caregiver. If this conversation is ***not*** intimidating to you, then you fall into the lucky minority. It will not be easy. But here are a few tips that might make "The Conversation" a bit easier and more successful:

* **It's a conversation:**  Meaning, talking with an older loved one and not to them is critical.  It is essential to involve them in decision-making.
* **Baby steps**:  Only discuss what you and your parents are comfortable with during the conversation.  Try and empathize with how your parent might be thinking and feeling.  Moving from a place of familiarity to the unknown is a giant leap, and change is more challenging to manage as you age. Test the waters with some more straightforward questions about senior living before diving into the deep end: "Did you see that new senior living community they are building down the street? What do you think?". "Have you ever visited a relative in a nursing home?". "I hear the food is pretty good at that community we passed the other day." Begin by talking about senior living before directly mentioning moving or bringing in assistance.
* **Body Language**:  Watch and listen for body language changes (crossed arms, change in posture, raised eyebrows, clenched jaw) that might indicate when the conversation needs to end or the topic needs to change.  If you perceive that the subject is causing some stress, change the topic, and see if you can analyze what part of the conversation caused the stress.  Was it the expense?  Was it the dated concept of a "nursing home"?  Or, was it stress related to the change itself?  Once the stressor is better understood, strategize on how to address that topic in the next conversation. For example, if the stress was related to their concept of what "nursing homes" used to be like, bring a laptop to the next conversation and show them images of what senior living communities are like today.
* **Open-ended conversation**:  Don't decide in advance what you think the outcome should be.  Discover the best solution alongside your older loved one, but be realistic as well.  Asking open-ended questions will help you identify what they authentically might find to be most comfortable - hopefully, you can arrive at the best solution together.  It's easier on older adults if they feel that they are participants in the transition journey;  however, it's essential to be realistic.  Transitioning an older loved one into senior living early on, when they are healthy enough to be admitted, is extremely important.  Waiting too long can put families in a difficult position with limited choices, and a skilled nursing facility might be the only option. These environments are much less inviting than senior living communities.
* **Eyes on the Prize:**  Stay focused on the goal, which is finding the care and environment that will enable the older adult in your life to **thrive**.  I have experienced many stories in which older adults were in decline due to physical impairment, cognitive impairment, or isolation.  Alongside their supportive families, they made a difficult transition and began to thrive as a result.  It is not a comfortable journey, and The Conversation is challenging, but the results are well worth the conscious effort to understand. Be compassionate, and proceed with loving-kindness (even in the face of resistance or reluctance). It is important to remember that it is their life that will change most radically, and hopefully for the best!