



Difficult Conversations: When it's Time to Ask for Help

By Cassandra Van Dyck

It goes without saying that although you may be able to meet many of your care partner's needs, you cannot (nor should you be able to) meet all of them. No one person can provide all the emotional and physical support that someone needs, especially if they're struggling with an illness or disability. Despite knowing this, your loved one may depend on you for more than you can give. You may have settled into a good routine with your care partner and their health care team and then encounter a new challenge that you are not capable of handling. At some point in your caregiving journey, you will find that you cannot provide the type of care that your loved one needs. This will be the time that you will need to talk to your care partner about connecting with another professional, and it may be a difficult conversation. Although you might need support and help to care for your loved one, your care partner might be resistant. They know and trust you and maybe some other doctors or health care professionals, but they don't know the new people that are being recommended and might not want to meet them. Being cared for requires a level of vulnerability that can be harder for some more than others, for various reasons. If you've tried to talk to your loved one about getting extra help and they've resisted, or you know that you need to speak with them soon and you're concerned with how they're going to react, the following tips might help you to navigate a tricky topic.

Introduce the topic mindfully.

When you're nervous about having a difficult conversation with someone, you might go over the many ways you think the talk might go before having it. Preparing for a conversation can help you anticipate questions and prepare answers, but it can also cause a lot of fear if you think the person you're talking to might react poorly. Try to be open to their reactions to prevent defensiveness. Although you'll never find a perfect moment to bring up something that's hard to talk about, aim for a good one. You might know that your loved one is the calmest after eating or shortly after they've woken up. Make sure you leave enough time for a lengthy conversation and avoid bringing up tough topics if you have to go somewhere else quickly or if someone else will be visiting.

Be calm and direct.

Though it doesn't have to be perfect, and there's a good chance that it won't be, try to broach the topic calmly and directly. One of the most common mistakes people make when starting a tough conversation is to avoid the topic. This can be confusing for the other person and may cause them to be more upset.

"I've noticed lately that you are limping when you're walking. I've done some research and I think a physiotherapist might be able to help. How would you feel about seeing one?"

"It seems like you're having trouble cooking meals. I've looked in to it and found some volunteer services that can provide meals and help with grocery shopping. What do you think about that option?"

"The past few weeks your mood has seemed very low. I know it can be hard to open up to a new person, but talking to a counsellor might be helpful. I'd be happy to go with you to meet someone. How do you feel about it?"

Practice Active Listening.

Now that you've started the conversation, you'll want to remain open to your loved one's reaction. This is probably the part of the conversation that you've been dreading, since you might think they'll react negatively. Although this is the scary part, it's also the time when you have the most control over how the rest of the discussion will go. If your loved one says "no" to your suggestion or acts hurt or offended that you'd suggest bringing another professional in to their circle of care, your instinct might be to react strongly. You might be worried that their refusal to accept assistance will increase the pressure on you or make their situation worse. This might make you angry or want to shut down, but those reactions will not help.

Practicing active listening increases mutual understanding. You can practice active listening by using open body language, giving your loved one the time to fully express themselves, and by using empathy to reflect their feelings back to them. This will help you to understand where they're coming from and alleviate some of their fears, and it will help your loved one know that you care about how they feel.

Here's an example:

Sadaf has told her mother that she's noticed her mood has been low lately and has suggested talking to their family doctor about connecting her with a counsellor for some extra support. She has asked how her mother would feel about it.

Sadaf's mother responds, "I'm fine and I don't need to talk to anyone. I won't bother you with my problems anymore."

Sadaf feels frustrated by this response and wants to walk away, but remembers to use active listening.

"It sounds like you're really hesitant about talking to someone else about how you've been feeling. I know you're not fine because of what you've been telling me. What about talking to someone else worries you?"

This question and reflection opens up the conversation for Sadaf's mother to talk about her concerns and for Sadaf to respond with empathy and answer any questions she might have.

Do Your Research.

If you spend time researching options for your loved one before talking to them, you will have more knowledge to answer their questions which may help them adjust to the idea of talking to someone new. Do remember that you don't have to have all the answers! If your loved one asks a question you don't have the answer to, offer to look in to it with them. You can say, "I don't have the answers yet, but I'd love to sit down with you and explore the options together."

Let them know they're not alone.

Sometimes one of the scariest things about accepting help is the possibility that existing supports will disappear. You can help to ease your care partner's fears by reassuring them that you are not going anywhere. You could try saying, "It can be scary to accept help from new people. Please know that I care about you and want to be able to help you in the best way I can. I think involving this person could help me to be the best support person possible."

Go with them to meet the new care provider. Debrief afterwards.

Having you with them when they meet their new care provider might help ease some of the stress of involving a new person in their care. You might be able to support your care partner by asking questions and reflecting back what you're hearing from the care provider in a way that your loved one will understand. After the appointment, check in with your loved one to see how they're feeling. "How was that for you? What did you think?" Practice active listening to explore where they're at.

3 Tips for Caregivers:

- Debrief with a trusted friend or therapist.
- Look at what support you need.
- Appreciate your best efforts.