

8 Things Your Aging Parents Want You to Know

As they get older, they often need to get some long-held things off their chest

By Linda Bernstein for Next Avenue



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“I felt guilty every day of my life that I was able to have children and Lilly wasn’t,” my 80-year-old mother confided, quietly, more than a little choked up.

Lilly was Mom’s older, much beloved cousin whose lack of offspring had always been a matter of whispered speculation among the relatives of my generation. There was talk of a botched abortion, something that would have been positively scandalous in 1940. Even when “the kids” grew up, it would not have been divulged.

My mother wasn’t revealing a family secret. It wasn’t the *reason* for Lilly’s childless state that was troubling her. She was sharing with me a feeling that had haunted her for decades. What could I say that would be helpful? I pondered that a moment before I opened my mouth.

I said what I knew to be true: “You adored Lilly. All of us kids loved her, too. I’m sure she knew how much you cared about her.”

For our elderly parents, “getting their house in order” often involves more than consulting with a tax attorney or an [estate planner](#), says [Ken Druck](#), author of *The Real Rules of Life*. As people

age, many reach a stage where they are no longer concerned that we will judge them, so they confide feelings that remained unvoiced for years. “There comes a point where they feel intimate enough with us as adults that they can share unknown truths about their emotional lives,” Druck says.

Seeing Parents in a New Light

These conversations have the potential to help us see our parents in a new light and forge a deeper connection with them. The trick, of course, is knowing how to respond to door-opening revelations that may shake us a bit.

“In almost all cases, no matter what you really feel, it’s best to lead off with a response that enables your parent to unburden him or herself even further,” Druck advises. Lend a good ear. Ask open-ended questions. Avoid sarcasm. There really are some monumental things our aging mothers and fathers want us to know. These disclosures may improve our relationships with them — and their lives.

8 Ways Our Parents Might Spill the Beans

Sometimes they’re aware they’re dropping little bombs; other times their motivation could be unconscious. Either way, our job is to be non-reactive and supportive and remember that their confession is more about them than us.

Confession 1: “When you were little, I loved your brother more than I loved you.” Even though parents say things like “I love all of you the same,” it’s common for parents to feel differently toward each of their children. As long as they don’t overtly show favoritism, the family dynamic isn’t necessarily unhealthy.

Don’t say: “Really? Well, I love Dad more than you!”

Say instead: “Why are you telling me this now? Is there something else you want me to know?” Druck says elderly parents frequently bring up emotionally charged issues for reasons that may not be immediately evident, so give them an opportunity to get to the heart of the matter. If their admission unleashes emotions that are too painful for you to process in the moment, tell them this hurts you or makes you uncomfortable. Don’t get into recriminations that will throw grease

on the flames of a potential conflict — but if you're open to it, initiate a conversation about how your parent feels about you and your siblings' different personalities and ask if there's anything deeper they'd like to discuss.

Confession 2: “I really miss sex.” These four words actually convey two messages. First of all, touch is a basic human need — sex is often as much about the cuddling as it is about intercourse. Perhaps your parent is revealing a deep loneliness. Second, seniors are often a lot [friskier](#) than we may imagine.

Don't say: “TMI!!!”

Say instead: “I can understand that.” Druck thinks parents divulge information like this when they feel close to their adult children — in other words, when we become trusted companions. If you haven't discussed sex with your parents since “the talk” 40 or so years ago, this may be the time. You don't have to share your own sex stories; just listen. And if you learn that the underlying emotion is loneliness, suggest things he or she might do to deal with that.

Confession 3: “It makes me angry that I'm ‘invisible’ to so many people.” It is shocking the kinds of things people say about the elderly right in front of them, as if they can't hear and feel. This disrespectful behavior infantilizes our aging parents.

Don't say: “Just ignore it.”

Say instead: “You are extremely visible to me, and I will do my best to make sure others treat you appropriately.” If your parent is in an assisted-living or nursing home, Druck says, it's perfectly appropriate to take this up with the management. Workers there have to recognize that even if someone needs help getting from one end of the room to the other, her brain might still be sharp and her feelings may be hurt if attendants and visitors make derogatory comments. If your aging parents are still living on their own, help them feel more included. Our parents have a lifetime of experience and knowledge. At gatherings, encourage them to tell stories or give their opinions.

Confession 4: “I had an abortion when I was 19, and I still feel guilty.”

Don't say: “What's the big deal?” Attitudes toward abortion — though still a highly contentious issue — have altered significantly since the 1940s and 1950s. Back then, historian [Ricki](#)

[Sollinger](#) says, people accepted the conventional “wisdom” that held that “women must passively receive and submit to the ‘gifts’ of marriage, especially pregnancy.”

Say instead: “Mom, that was a long time ago, and you were still a child. How can I help you forgive yourself?” Even if you privately believe abortion is wrong, you need to be empathetic. Let her know that you understand she probably felt unimaginable societal pressure. If she is afraid of consequences of her “sin” after she dies, guide her toward pastoral counseling. Or, if the subsequent conversation indicates she still thinks a lot about the child she might have had, suggest a different kind of therapy.

Confession 5: “No one knows I’m taking tango lessons.”

Don’t say: “Aren’t you a little old to be doing that?”

Say instead: “Wow. I’m impressed. But why aren’t you telling anyone?” We all have passions — for music, movies, books and even the tango. When people are shy or inhibited about discussing the thing they love to do, sometimes they’ll keep it secret to avoid negative reactions. But when your parent opens a door to his or her “inner” life, walk right through. It’s wonderful that your parent has found a fun way to be active — and wants to share it with you. (By the way, dance is a [terrific form of therapy](#) for seniors.)

Confession 6: “I used to think I needed to see a psychiatrist because I had lots of anxiety attacks, but I was too ashamed to go.” Even today, [stigma surrounds psychotherapy](#) and people are afraid of being labeled “mentally ill.”

Don’t say: “Sure. Then everyone would’ve known how nutty this family was!”

Say instead: “Do you still feel anxious or troubled? If you do, you may want to tell your doctor — or let me help you find a good psychotherapist.” Anxiety can be crippling and there is no need for an elderly person to be debilitated by this disorder. Sometimes, however, anxiety attacks dissipate when the triggers no longer exist. Your parent may be asking you for help or confiding something simply to let you know more about her inner life.

Confession 7: “I still worry about you — a lot.” While we might prefer our parents not expend energy uselessly, worrying is what mothers and fathers do. It may feel bothersome, but it is probably an expression of love.

Don't say: "Well, you can stop."

Say instead: "I know how much you care about me." Druck recommends not "jumping into the worry pond." Instead, before assuring parents there's no reason to fret (as long as that's true), let them know how much you appreciate their love — even if all their worrying can get exasperating because you are, you know, a grownup.

Confession 8: "Your mom and I would have gotten divorced, but we stayed together because of you and your siblings." You probably realized on some level that your parents' marriage isn't or wasn't happy, so a revelation like this usually doesn't come as a total surprise. Before "[no-fault](#)" [divorce laws](#), couples were more likely to stay in miserable marriages. The divorce rate actually doubled between 1960 and 1980 and recently has been spiking among people over 50. To this day researchers can't agree whether and to what degree divorce hurts children.

Don't say: "I know — and you made our lives miserable."

Say instead: "Does that still make you sad?" Let your parents know that you sympathize with their predicament and will support them in any way they would like. The one thing not to do in this circumstance is take sides.

As our parents age, they are trying to be at peace with their lives. Druck believes that by listening and acknowledging their feelings, we can become "spiritual anchors" and improve the quality of their remaining years.

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