

## Communicating Effectively

There are three principles of effective communication that may be helpful as families talk together to plan for long-term care, make difficult decisions, or express emotions. These principles are speaking clearly, listening carefully and responding accurately.

### Speak Clearly

When you need to communicate your thoughts or wishes, take the time to speak clearly in order to express your feelings accurately.

- Know your goal: Think about what you want to accomplish through a conversation. This can help you stay focused by having a clear goal in mind.
- Stay on track: Remember to stay on this topic and don't get off track. It is easy to be led astray and bring up old hurts or unrelated issues.
- Be clear and specific about what you feel or what you need. Don't assume that other people know how you feel or what you need. Be tactful and specific when stating your needs in order to reduce the potential of misunderstanding.
- Be sensitive to the feelings of others. If you feel the need to criticize, keep it constructive and emphasize the positives.
- Avoid blaming. Take responsibility for your own feelings. Remember that only you can control how you respond to your feelings and you cannot control someone else's emotions.
- Avoid using terms such as "you always" or "you never." These are likely to trigger a defensive response that could be unrelated to the issue at hand.

- Use "I" messages. This is a communications technique where you state your feelings or needs rather than blaming the other person with a "YOU" message. For example, you might say, "I was hurt when I didn't get to help plan the family dinner." Rather than, "You hurt my feelings because you left me out of the plans." "You" messages tend to put the other person on the defensive and create barriers to good communication. "I" messages avoid blaming and create a less threatening environment.

### Be a Good Listener

When someone is talking to you, make an effort to be a good listener. You need to be able to both speak clearly and listen carefully in order to communicate effectively.

- Be sure to give the speaker your full attention. Make eye contact, avoid distractions and keep your mind on what is being said.
- Listen with an open mind. Avoid forming an opinion until you have all the facts.
- Respect the right of the other person to have differing feelings and opinions.
- Be empathetic. Respecting the opinions of another doesn't mean you have to agree. You have your own feelings, too. But try to understand the other person's point of view and avoid contradicting and arguing.
- Let the other person finish speaking without interrupting. Give the speaker time to complete a thought. Interrupting before the speaker is finished may lead to inaccurate interpretations.

- Get all the facts. Ask the speaker to clarify any questions you have about what is said.

### Respond accurately

- Use a technique called "reflective listening" where you "reflect" back your understanding of what the other person has said. This can help avoid misunderstanding by giving the person the opportunity to clarify or correct what they are trying to say. For example, you might say, "I think I'm hearing that you are angry about the decision to sell Mom's house." The other person could respond either with, "Yes, I'm angry about this decision...." Or they might say, "No, that's not what I meant. I was just expressing sadness that we had to sell it." So by "reflective listening," you are able to have a better understanding of what is being said and felt by the other person.
- Avoid giving advice unless it is asked for. A good listener allows the speaker to express feelings or issues without jumping in with advice. If the speaker asks for advice, offer positive ideas based on the request. Don't give additional advice beyond the issue being discussed.
- Listen and respond in a non-judgmental way. Focus on the situation as it is today. Avoid criticizing past behaviors or decisions.

Others may not use effective communications skills, but if you remain calm and continue to speak with positive statements, it will help reduce conflict. Remember you cannot control how another person responds to a situation, but you can control your own response.