# Humpty Dumpty Never Saw It Coming

How to talk with your parents about fall safety.



by Ethan Blumen
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# About My Aging Parents

*My Aging Parents* is a free email newsletter of practical tips and strategies for adult children who care.

We focus on what to expect when you're expecting older parents. So you can help them stay as healthy and independent as possible for as long as possible — without taking years off your own life in the process.

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# It's Always Too Early Until It's Too Late

One bad fall changes everything.

"For the elderly, a fall is a life-changing and potentially life-ending event."

— Christine Kistler, MD

## The Facts Are Staggering:

- Falls are the leading cause of injury and injury-related death for adults ages 65 and over.
- Falls cause more than 80% of hip fracture deaths in this age group. And the risk of death within a year after a hip fracture increases by up to 25% — with even higher rates for the oldest patients.
- Full recovery from a hip fracture is not common. Only 40 to 60% of hip fracture survivors regain their prior level of mobility and ability to perform complex daily tasks independently, such as taking medications or cooking.

It's hard to overstate how much havoc a parent's fall can wreak with your own plans and priorities — and how long that fallout will last.

If you want to help your parent stay healthy and independent, talking about fall risk and prevention is essential. But for many families, that conversation doesn't happen soon enough.

## Why You Need to Step Up

One reason for the delay: Waiting for Mom or Dad to let you know if something is wrong.

Don't count on it. Fall prevention is one of those loaded "we need to talk" topics. It's not just about safety. It's about control and shifting roles. While you're worried about Dad taking a header down the stairs, he's worried that your anxiety is going to cost him his independence.

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# Fall Risk Warning Signs

**The worst way to find out your parent is at risk for falling is after a bad fall. Humpty Dumpty never saw it coming, but you can watch for these red flags:**

### Mom has already fallen at least once.

Seems obvious, right? But it's common for parents and their families to dismiss the first fall as a one-time event — especially if no one was seriously hurt.

That's a big mistake. Fall prevention research from the CDC is clear: After one fall, the likelihood that your parent falls again doubles.

### Stumbles and near-falls.

The only difference between a stumble and a fall is the ability to regain balance or grab something before you hit the ground — or your head — on the way down.

Another way to describe a near-fall is "good luck." Don't take it for granted. If Dad is starting to stumble, it's just a matter of time before his luck runs out.

### It's harder to get out of chairs, climb stairs or step up on curbs.

This may be a sign of weak leg muscles — a key reason older adults fall.

### Mom is holding onto furniture, walls, or other people for support.

Does she use a cane or a walker while walking? Poor balance is a major contributing factor to falls.

### Your parent is taking a lot of meds.

Some prescription drugs for chronic or common conditions can cause drowsiness, dizziness, confusion, blurred vision, or low blood pressure when taken alone or together with other drugs.

### Dad rushes to the bathroom.

When you gotta go, you gotta go. But hurrying to the toilet greatly increases fall risk — especially at night.

### Mom is worried about falling.

Older adults who worry about falling are more likely to fall. This anxiety can lead to reduced physical activity, isolation, and depression — which also increase the likeliness of another fall.

### Health conditions known to increase fall risk.

Some of the most common include dehydration, poor vision, hearing problems, dizziness, sudden drops in blood pressure, hip pain, foot pain, arthritis, Parkinson's Disease, and dementia.

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Embarrassment is another reason many falls are never reported. It's not uncommon for adult children to be clueless about dad's history of falling until an ambulance is involved.

Denial is another problem: "Falling is just a normal part of aging." (It's not!) "It was a fluke that won't happen again." (It will!)

Finally, Mom doesn't want to be a burden. You've got enough to deal with and she doesn't want you to worry.

## It's Always Too Early Until It's Too Late

Talking about fall risk and prevention is a conversation that needs to happen, even when your parent appears to be in good health.

Take a lesson from all the healthy older adults in rehab who insisted it was too soon to talk. Until they tripped over a dog toy or slipped on a loose throw rug. It's always too early, until it's too late.

There's no one-size-fits-all magical formula for talking to your parent about fall prevention. Every family and every situation are different.

But there are steps you can take to make it easier for you to connect with your parent as a thoughtful, trusted collaborator, and increase your chances for success.

### *For More*

- Falls Free CheckUp (NCOA) — Use this free online tool to better understand your parent's fall risk.
- 10 Myths About Older Adults and Falls (NCOA)
- Preventing Falls in Older Adults (Harvard Health)
- 10 Types of Medications to Review If You're Concerned About Falling (Better Health While Aging)
- Evidence-Based Falls Prevention Programs (NCOA)

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# Mindset Matters

## Planning to talk with Mom about fall safety? Get your head right first.

Talking with your parents about fall safety can push primal buttons.

Like the time your dentist didn't use enough novocain. Or when your 10-year-old called you by your first name.

What can you do to keep your cool? A lot depends on your mindset.

You're concerned about Mom's dizzy spells. But if you go into this conversation fueled by anxiety and righteous logic, you're going to hit every button in the elevator on the way down.

Use these tips to set positive intentions and realistic expectations — and to get your head right before you open your mouth.

### Acknowledge Your Feelings

You know you need to say something. But it's also common to meet this moment with fear, frustration, and resentment.

"Am I going to be able to keep Dad safe? Why is this all on me? Why won't [insert sibling's name] help? I don't want to deal with this!"

If this is the soundtrack in your head, don't ignore it. These kinds of conversations throw sparks. Showing up with a short fuse you've been soaking in gasoline will not help.

The more you can process your feelings before you talk, the easier it will be for you to stay calm and centered.

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Think of this emotional work as an act of self-compassion. As we begin to help our parents, it's not uncommon to trigger deep-rooted feelings. Take care of yourself: If you need professional support, get it.

## Don't Be Put Off by Pushback

Talking about fall prevention is often one of the first conversations where traditional parent/child roles begin to change. Buttons will be pushed.

Don't be put off when your parents push back. This is a time for a gentle approach and gentle words — not language that creates more tension.

Your goal is to listen, not lecture. To do that, your parent needs to feel comfortable sharing their feelings and concerns. Staying calm will do a lot more to keep everyone talking than thinly veiled frustration and urgency.

> Let go of the idea that you can keep your parents 100% safe. You can't.

## There's Only So Much You Can Do

Let go of the idea that you're in control. You may be able to influence your parent's attitude and behavior, but you can't control it.

You are not dealing with a stubborn child. You're dealing with another adult, who has a lifetime of experience and preferences, and the right to make decisions about the risks they want to take.

Your parent's decision may very well be a poor one. You don't have to like it. But there's only so much you can do. Persistent nagging is more likely to damage your relationship than change anyone's mind.

Unless there are credible questions about capacity, accept that your parents make their own decisions, and they are responsible for their actions — not you.

## Choose Possible Over Perfect

Let go of the idea that you can keep your parents 100% safe. You can't. You can say and do all the right things, but you cannot eliminate all risk.

It's easy to feel there's always something more you could do. Or that somehow, through sheer force of will, you'll find a way to save your parent from themselves. Again, not realistic, and ultimately, not helpful.

What is helpful is choosing to accept what is possible over what is perfect. The more realistic you are, the more likely you and your parent will keep talking, instead of shutting down or lashing out at each other.

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## Stockpile Empathy

Empathy for your parent's feelings and concerns will help you respond with patience instead of reacting in frustration.

It can also help them see you as an advocate, not an adversary.

Put yourself in your parent's shoes. If you have kids, how do you want them to treat you in this situation? Act accordingly. Chances are they're already taking notes.

Or try this thoughtful take on the Golden Rule: "Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you."

## Focus on Making Progress

Talking about fall safety is a process. It may take a series of conversations and different approaches before Mom talks to her doctor about her dizzy spells and Dad stops riding his unicycle blindfolded.

Focus on making progress. If all you do is share your concerns, listen to your parent's perspective, and agree to follow up, you're off to a great start!

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### *For More:*

- Falls Prevention Conversation Guide for Caregivers (NCOA)

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# Conversation Starters

Five ways to make talking about fall safety easier.

In a moment, we'll cover how to start the conversation, so it feels a lot less awkward than the moment you realized Mom and Dad wanted to talk about the birds and bees.

But first, a few words about where you talk. Because it matters.

## "The Setting Is Crucial"

Quiet moments and private places create the best conditions to connect without distractions or interruptions.

"The setting is crucial," writes geriatric psychology expert David Solie. His advice: Steer clear of noisy restaurants and take a walk or a drive.

> "Some discussions are best approached from the side, not head on… A walk provides a kind of safety shield, another focus in an interesting venue, especially when the topics are difficult…
>
> "A drive is like a walk on wheels. When we are having trouble resolving an important issue, getting in the car and going somewhere or nowhere at all can take the conversation in a new direction. As with a walk, this exchange does not have to be face-to-face and might make the older person feel more comfortable…"

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## Ready to get the ball rolling?

Here are some approaches that make talking about fall safety easier.

## Tell a Story About a Friend

Humans are hard-wired to listen to stories. Stories are how we learn from the experience of others. And stories that create an emotional response are powerful when we see ourselves in a similar situation. For example:

"Someone at work told me her parents are redoing their bathrooms and adding safety features like grab bars and better lighting. It's part of a plan to make their home easier and safer to live in as they get older. Is that something you've ever thought about?"

Or:

"How are you doing with the stairs? I was thinking about what happened to my friend's mother. It made me realize that a bad fall can happen to anyone. I'm worried that could happen to you and I want to be prepared. Can we talk about that?"

## Use an Article or Website

This is an easy, non-threatening way to back into a conversation because it's indirect. For example:

"Mom, I read this article, and it raised a number of issues that got me thinking. What do you think?"

Or:

"My friend sent me a link to this website about simple things people do to stay safe at home as they get older. I'd like to send it to you and get your opinion."

Here are three brief articles from the National Council on Aging. Choose one you think is likely to work for you:

- Debunking the Myths of Older Adult Falls
- How to Prevent Falls with Home Safety Modifications
- Falls Prevention Success Stories

## What Happens in an Emergency?

Older adults who aren't surefooted are often able to manage predictable everyday (and nighttime) routines. But emergency situations are a different story.

When safety depends on awareness, agility, and quick action, older adults are particularly vulnerable. Even minor accidents can have major consequences.

"What if you fall and you can't call someone for help or if there is a power outage or a fire? These situations can go from bad to worse quickly, especially if you are injured."

## Have You Talked With Your Doctor?

Consider this approach if your parent is living with a chronic health condition, or if you've noticed changes that could increase fall risk:

"Have you talked with your doctor about how to make things safer at home? I'll be happy to come with you if you think it would be helpful to get expert advice."

Of course, it's possible the last person Dad wants to see is his doctor. But it's also possible that your concern moves him to make that call.

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Either way, the sooner your parent sees their doctor, the better. Changing health conditions and new medications can affect fall risk. The doc can also prescribe a home safety assessment from an occupational therapist.

## When Mom Won't Hit the Ball Back

Don't kid yourself: Mom knows why you're showing her an article about fall prevention.

So, if your efforts are met with all the enthusiasm of hitting a tennis ball into a wet blanket, or the conversation doesn't develop naturally, don't push it.

You've planted a seed. Don't expect the tree to grow overnight. Give her space and try a different approach at a later time.

**Pro tip:** If Mom is still reluctant, offer to set a time limit: "Let's just spend 10 or 15 minutes talking. If you want to talk longer, great. If not, that's fine, too."

Why this might work: Awkward conversations aren't easy. Having a clear time-bound agreement about when to stop talking can make it easier to start. And all you need to do is make a start.

When time is up, ask Mom if she wants to continue. If not, tell her you'd like to set another time to follow up.

### *For More*

- How to Say It to Seniors (Amazon)
- What You Should Know about Home Safety Assessments (HealthMarkets)

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# Fall Safety Talking Tips

How to keep the conversation going.

Talking about fall prevention isn't a one and done deal. It's an open-ended conversation. Because your parent's fall risk can change, and your ability to talk about those changes becomes more valuable over time.

So go easy on yourself. This is new territory. Finding your way takes takes patience, persistence, and practice.

The important thing is to keep the conversation going. Here are some key principles and talking tips that will help:

## Speak and Respond With Empathy

Talking about fall prevention is about more than safety. It's about getting older and how everyone processes the fear and feelings of loss this transition triggers.

Keep in mind that you've been thinking about this conversation for some time, but it's probably a surprise to Dad.

You've also started to work through your feelings, another advantage Dad hasn't had. Which is all the more reason to be ready for raw emotions and mindful about your response.

Choose empathy, writes Dr. Regina Koepp, a clinical psychologist who specializes in working with older adults and families:

> "Soften your tone and practice listening. Listen for the anger, sadness, and fear. Don't run away from your parents' feelings, instead move towards them with love and care. Giving your parents the room to express themselves with you listening and being empathetic will help them adjust to changes and strengthen the relationship between you."

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## Watch Your Speed

Talking too quickly can easily make your parent feel overwhelmed and pressured.

"Pacing is critical," writes Steven Barlam, LCSW, an Aging Life Care Professional who has worked with older parents and adult children for more than 30 years.

> "I've seen adult children heading into conversations moving at 90 mph even though their parents may be moving at 25 mph. Often these situations result in the parent saying no to whatever is being suggested or they flatly refuse help."

Slow down when talking to your parents, advises Barlam. "To prevent rushing, check yourself during the conversation. Does your pace match that of your family member?"

## Don't Try to Push Past Resistance

"Forcing a tough discussion or pushing for a swift decision may result in less-than-ideal outcomes," warns Barlam. "You may spend the entire talk de-escalating a situation that arose simply because of the conversation itself, and wind up needing to postpone the talk to another time."

**Pro tip:** Instead of arguing, geriatrician Leslie Kernisan, MD. recommends using a response she describes as both neutral and encouraging: "Hmmm. Tell me more. What are you concerned about?"

Kernisan's rule of thumb: Ask questions instead of making statements. "People really want to feel listened to and validated, not lectured to," she says.

If the conversation hits a wall, it's best to step back, let it go, and set a time to follow up in a couple weeks. In the interim, revisit the story you may be telling yourself about your parent's resistance.

Do not dismiss your parent's resistance as stubbornness, says Steven Zarit, PhD, a pioneering researcher on family caregiving and stress, and co-author of a study called "My Parent Is So Stubborn!"

"When a child thinks, 'My parent is stubborn,' that's the end of engagement with the parent," he says. "It's easier to have a conversation if you think 'My mother is trying to hold on to the things that are most important to her,' not that she's just stubborn."

## Avoid Getting Triggered

Talking with your parents about sensitive topics can get emotional and it's easy to get derailed by feelings about past or recent resentments. Staying present will help you stay on topic, advises Dr. Koepp:

> "During this conversation, if your mind (or feelings) shift back to times in your relationship where there has been pain or conflict, or you notice that you and your parent are getting off-track, simply notice it, and shift the focus back to the topic at hand," she writes.

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> "It's important to know that this will be one of many conversations to come. So if things do get heated… or either one of you is hitting a brick wall… and you are not communicating effectively, simply say, 'This was a good start. Let's take a break and try again another time.'"

## Collaborate, Don't Dictate

Remember, you're not just talking with your parent. You are talking with an adult who wants to feel relevant and respected and in control of their life.

You are also talking with someone who has spent a lifetime giving you advice.

So ask for your parent's advice. Ask for Mom's perspective and suggestions about how to address your concerns. Ask her to help brainstorm solutions and next steps.

Take throw rugs, for example. They are notorious trip hazards and a leading cause of fall-related injuries. Without question, your best move is to banish them.

But good luck opening with "Mom, that throw rug is going to kill you. It's got to go." That's not a conversation. That's an invitation to a power struggle that ***starts*** over a rug.

Instead, try this approach:

"Mom, I know you love the throw rug in the hall, but it slips and slides and the edges always curl over. What do you think we could do so no one trips?"

Again, the ideal solution is to find another home for mom's favorite throw rug. But that remedy is more likely when it's the result of a collaborative conversation, not a directive.

### *For More*

- Center for Mental Health and Aging (Regina Koepp, PsyD)
- Better Help While Aging (Leslie Kernisan, MD)


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