

OPINION

The all-consuming stage of adulthood they never told you about: Looking after aging parents

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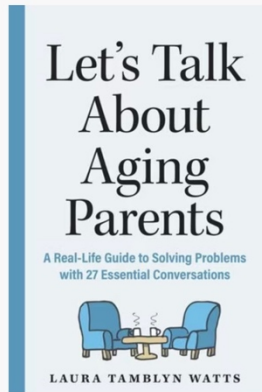
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Can you have a conversation with boomer or Gen X friends and not talk about aging parents?

Laura Tamblyn Watts is immersed in matters related to aging through her job as CEO at the advocacy group CanAge, but even she is struck by how often this subject comes up. “It’s not just with friends and relatives,” she said. “It’s when I get together for business dinners. It’s in the grocery store when I’m looking back and I see somebody and they’ve got products for their parents’ incontinence.”

There are costs in time and money for providing care to aging parents, but bigger surprises await. One day, your parents are vital and active, and next you’re dealing with a medical emergency and looking into home care or retirement homes. Recognizing the lack of help or guidance for people providing eldercare, Ms. Tamblyn Watts wrote a book called [Let’s Talk About Aging Parents: A Real-Life Guide to Solving Problems with 27 Essential Conversations](#).



Let's Talk about Aging Parents: A Real-Life Guide to Solving Problems with 27 Essential Conversations

Laura Tamblyn Watts
Foreword by Debra Whitman

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The book is about helping kids and parents talk through issues like getting your parents help around the house, downsizing and moving them into a retirement or long-term care home. The theme is simple: prepare now, before hard choices must be made later under great stress.

In some cultures, it's a natural part of family life to look after aging parents. But many of us have traditional Canadian ideas about independence. We want it for ourselves and expect it of others. Aging parents may be as surprised to need help as their adult children are about providing it.

Ms. Tamblyn Watts said her book is aimed at people in their 30s through 70s, a reflection of the sweeping demographic of caregiving. "I had a conversation recently with a man in his 70s talking about taking care of his dad, who was 97," she said.

Asked what kind of help adult kids are providing their parents, Ms. Tamblyn Watts first mentioned dementia care. "About 75 per cent of dementia care in Canada is provided at home by family members," she said. "And, they are completely untrained for it. We don't have any programs that teach a person to do dementia care."

Adult kids are also providing levels of hands-on medical and home care that go well beyond weekly visits and outings. Ms. Tamblyn Watts described the duties of adult kids as a combination care co-ordinator and personal support worker.

Technology can help manage these responsibilities, but the result is often more work for adult kids. For example, mobile phone apps might help keep your parents supplied with groceries. But who will actually use the app to place the orders – them or you?

“We are buying groceries, and at the same time we’re doing things like computer setup,” Ms. Tamblyn Watts added. “Every password and every pop-up and every cookie needs to be explained. It’s not that people can’t learn – it’s just constant change that is so upsetting.”

The cost in money of supporting aging parents could be gas, parking and transit when you visit, or more substantial amounts to help cover the fees for home care or a retirement home. A more subtle cost is the time spent providing care rather than at work. Your income and career prospects could be affected.

The best way to prepare for your aged parents’ care needs is to have conversations with them about how things are going, and their preferences in terms of extra help. Complicating these conversations is a kind of role reversal where adult kids basically assume the role of parent.

“It’s uncomfortable,” Ms. Tamblyn Watts said, “In their minds, parents are still the adults in the relationship. And you’re still their child, but at the same time you’re their caregiver.”

Her suggestion for dealing with role reversal is to start discussions with your parents by asking their advice. If you want to discuss their finances, start talking about your own financial questions and ask for comments. For example, you could start a conversation about estate planning by talking about getting your own will and powers of attorney completed or updated.

Ms. Tamblyn Watts book is set up to coach readers through big steps like moving into a home and smaller ones like when it’s time to stop driving, dealing with vision loss and incontinence.

What you’ll hear as you work through this book is the voice of experience. Ms. Tamblyn Watts’ own parents turn 87 this year. “I’m 52,” she said. “I’m in it.”

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