Holidays a good time to check in with aging relatives

December 21, 2012 | By Diane C. Lade, Staff writer

As families gather for the holidays, it could be time to have serious discussions with elder relatives. But some of the questions can be touchy. Do they feel safe at home? Can they handle an unexpected hospitalization? Have they fallen victim to con artists or giving out their personal information?

"These are huge topics and they can seem insurmountable. But handled properly, I think these discussions can be loving and fun," said psychotherapist Glenda Connolly, the family services coordinator at the Louis and Anne Green Memory and Wellness Center, on Florida Atlantic University's Boca Raton campus (fau.edu/memorywellnesscenter or 561-297-0502).

Some tips? Don't gang up on the senior family member, Connolly said. Ask questions and have a discussion rather than issue ultimatums. And start with a personal reminiscence or shared family experience that will set a positive, caring tone. Check out the following examples.

Q: I noticed some dents on the car. Do you want me to help you find a repair shop?

Jumping right in with "Mom, should you be driving?" won't get you far. Instead, quietly examine the elder's vehicle for serious dents or scrapes you didn't see last time.

When talking about the damage, find out if it involved an accident. If so, suggest the older driver go in for a professional driving evaluation, just to make sure their skills are up to snuff (The American Occupational Therapy Association at aota.org/older-driver or 301-652-2682). Then the pros, not you, can decide if Mom needs to give up the keys.

Q: Did you see on the news about those con artists who pretend they are someone's grandkid in trouble and need money? Did you ever get a phone call like that?

Financial exploitation targeting seniors has become so widespread that it was the focus of this year's Eldercare Locator Home for the Holidays campaign, an annual event encouraging family conversations.

"A lot of organizations are hearing more and more about older adults being scammed, being targeted by unscrupulous contractors, a range of things that are so sad," said Sandy Markwood, CEO of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging. The association manages the locator, an online site that steers families to local resources (eldercare.gov or 800-677-1116).

Markwood advises asking older relatives if they have received calls or mail from people claiming to be from their bank or asking for their Social Security number. Suggest they sign up
for state and federal "do not call" registries. Unpaid bills or debt collection phone calls also may signal that the senior has been scammed or is in financial trouble, Markwood said.

**Q: Kennel fees have gotten so expensive. Have you thought about what you would do with Scruffy if you couldn't take care of him for a while?**

Connolly said even seniors who have their finances and advanced medical directives in order often haven't made an emergency plan. And this isn't just about hurricane season.

Other scenarios to help older family members prepare for: What will happen if a spouse, caregiving for his or her seriously ill mate, unexpectedly gets sick? Who will care for an elder relative's pet in the event of a lengthy hospitalization? And where would your relative like to go if he or she needed a rehabilitation center or nursing home while recovering from surgery?

"We tell people while they are well to go around to the facilities, take the tours and get brochures. That way, if the time comes, they'll know where they want to go," Connolly said.

**Q: Remember that time we went to Uncle Ned's funeral and they had a violinist play that beautiful song? I would really like something like that at my service someday. How about you?**

Connolly said she was surprised, in a recent support group session, how many caregivers regretted not talking with their deceased loved ones about detailed funeral arrangements.

The Five Wishes living will form, offered through the Florida nonprofit Aging with Dignity, allows people to spell out not only their medical care preferences but also how they would like their death to be handled. Besides indicating burial or cremation preferences, will drafters can indicate if they want a memorial service, how they would like to be remembered and where their remains should be placed.

Copies are $5 each (agingwithdignity.org or 888-594-7437). And yes, President Paul Malley said, people do order them for holiday gifts.

"I had one man tell me he planned to use Five Wishes as a stocking stuffer," Malley said. "Hopefully, such a gift includes the family member saying, 'Here is the reason I gave this to you and let's talk about it.' "

dlade@tribune.com or 954-356-4295