

10 Questions

Tim Prosch on Giving Up the Car Keys and Easing Tough End-of-Life Conversations

by Jeffrey H. Rattiner, CFP®, CPA, RFC



WHO: Tim Prosch

WHAT: Speaker, strategic planner, author of *The Other Talk: A Guide to Talking with Your Adult Children about the Rest of Your Life*

WHAT'S ON HIS MIND: “[Having ‘the other talk’] is not about the end of your life. It’s about the rest of your life. It’s about the living that’s going to come ahead, and how we are going to manage it as a family, as a team.”



PODCAST: Listen to our podcast with Tim Prosch at www.FPAJournal.org.

Your clients with adult children surely sat those kids down at some point in their formative years to have “the talk” (the one about the birds and the bees). Now that those clients are aging, have they had “the other talk” with their adult children? That’s the conversation in which mom and dad make sure their adult children are aware of their wishes to ensure the challenges, issues, and decisions that their families will face in their last years of life are dealt with in the best way.

Strategic thinker and author Tim Prosch is the father behind this idea of “the other talk.” His book, *The Other Talk: A Guide to Talking with Your Adult Children about the Rest of Your Life*, walks the reader through how to start this important conversation and provides actionable information that ultimately serves to free your clients and their families to focus on getting the most out of the rest of their time together.

Prosch will be speaking at FPA’s National Conference—FPA BE: Seattle 2014 on the concept of having “the other talk.” The *Journal* recently talked to Prosch about the importance of

having this conversation today, some strategies for easing this conversation, as well as his take on end-of-life financial planning issues.

1. *Your book, The Other Talk, is getting a lot of attention. You have personal reasons for writing this book; tell us about that.*

My career has been in strategic marketing, primarily focusing on baby boomers. In the early days, I was a brand manager of Gillette and Colgate; later on I was on the advertising side on accounts like Hallmark, Kraft, and Coors, and then I started my own strategic marketing firm and had clients like Nike Golf.

Across all those assignments, I was always trying to answer the same questions of how people make decisions, what causes people to take action, and what causes people to take inaction. Over the last 10 years, I’ve interviewed quite a few people across the country [for my strategic marketing work], and I did a lot of work for hospice and palliative care clients, and I did a lot of work with funeral service organizations. What I kept hearing across that spectrum was

the same theme: “I’ll never put my kids through what just happened to me with my parents.” These were baby boomers talking about the tough experience they had with their parents.

I was going through the same thing with my own parents. For eight long years, I went through a nightmare with them. Mom had Alzheimer’s and dad had MS, and it was just really a terrible experience. The other thing that happened was the Terri Schiavo case, where for 15 years this poor woman was yanked back and forth between her husband and her parents because nobody had really sat down and agreed to what Terri wanted at the end of her life.

Then I also discovered through an AARP study that 75 percent of people never talk to their families about any of these issues, which seemed crazy to me, but then the more I got into the research, the more I realized that there are a lot of very heavy emotional barriers that keep people from talking, like denial. If you’re the [adult] kids, you don’t want to think about your parents [dying]. The other part of that is role reversal. If you’re the [adult] daughter, you become the parent and your parents become the children. Both of those are heavy emotional issues that eventually lead to the most important one, which is, as a parent, I feel like I’m losing control.

Based on all this, my conclusion was that we need to change the dynamic or the transaction, if you will, and not make it about taking control if you’re the kid, or losing control if you’re the parent, but why don’t we try to make this transaction about sharing control? The other thing I concluded was, if you go to the bookstores or look on Amazon, there are no books written for the [aging] parent. They’re all written for the adult children about how to take care of their incompetent parents.

I set out to write a book that changes the transaction and puts the onus on the parent to begin this conversation and overcome these emotional barriers.

2. *What are the financial planning issues at the end of life?*

Financial planning is not just about managing your assets, although that’s certainly important. It’s also about managing your expenses, and I don’t mean just your day-to-day expenses. I mean the cost of what I would call some pretty big life decisions.

[In the book] I talk about four key dimensions of the later years in life, and I think all four of them impact your finances.

One is financing an uncertain future. You know the [tricky] thing with saving for retirement is you don’t really know the where and the when and the how of the end game. You can only guess. When you’re saving for college, you pretty much know it’s going to be four years, and you’ll know what school you’re going to, but when you’re looking at your uncertain future, you don’t really know how much to save, but you can’t punt.

The second issue is affording the best living arrangement. Ninety percent of people will tell you they want live out their days in their home, but the vast majority of people won’t. What they really need to do is start to think—with their [adult] kids—“What can I afford?” I might want to live at a really ritzy retirement community, but if that’s not my reality, what do I do? What if I live off my kids? Well, that might be a financial decision, but there’s a lot of psychological and emotional issues there that you need to talk about, too.

The third point is getting the medical care that you deserve. One of the things I talk about in the book is the baby boomer’s perfect storm, which is coming right at us as we speak. There are 77 million of us [baby boomers] marching into retirement. We will live longer, probably 18 to 20 years from age 65. We will have more medical needs because we’re older, and things break more easily if you’re old. There will be

fewer and fewer primary care physicians or even geriatric physicians. You’ve got more demand and less supply, so how are we going to manage that? It’s a cost issue, but it’s also a planning issue.

The last point is taking charge of the end of your life, and I think there are two parts to that. One is that baby boomers are really empowering their adult kids to make decisions, because clearly, in their last days, [aging parents] are not going to be able to do that. That’s why boomers need to sit their kids down now and talk through all this stuff.

The other part is preparing your [adult] kids for life after you’re gone. For example, I encourage my readers to sit their kids down now and go through the will. Let’s say you decide that one of your kids did very well in life, financially, so you’re going to leave that person less than the one who was a social worker, who didn’t make much money. If you don’t confront that issue with them in the same room now, you’re going to guarantee a sibling donnybrook when you’re gone.

To me, that’s part of financial planning—sitting your kids down and saying, “Here’s what I’ve got. Here’s what we have to deal with, because you are going to end up with it.”

3. *How can financial planners use this book with their clients?*

This book is the barrier between the financial planner and client. The book is the third party. Say to the client, “Please read this book and let’s discuss afterwards.” I have found that many clients do not want to talk about their financial issues at the end.

The reversal of the traditional roles between parents and children that we talked about earlier is triggered when you reach the point, physically and or mentally, at which you cannot operate independently. The elderly begin to resist turning over responsibility for fear

of becoming powerless and becoming a burden on the family both physically and financially.

The chief concern is that this role reversal is often forced on the parents with little or no discussion. One way to avoid this is to have the client take responsibility for implementing action, not their [adult] kids. This pre-emptive approach lends a collaborative mindset that will actually empower every member of the client's family, including the children, for the unknown events that lie ahead.

Having the "other talk" should go beyond funeral and burial plans. It needs to delve into the judgments and decisions that must be made and how your [adult] children will both have an impact on those decisions and be affected by them.

The ultimate goal here is to provide the client with the tools and a road map to successfully engage their kids in the "other talk."

4. *How does this book help a financial planner's clients take charge of the end of their lives?*

In preparing for the end-of-life discussion, your clients will want to take steps in three critical areas: step one deals with guiding principles; step two deals with parameters for medical treatment; and step three deals with hospice.

The first step in making your clients' kids confident and empowered in taking charge when the time comes, is for them to confront and define what being alive means to them as they near the end of their lives.

Step two is taking charge of their life, versus abdicating to the medical community, and putting their preferences in writing. Equally important is to distribute and discuss their wishes with family members and doctors to ensure their goals will be achieved.

The third step is to consider the pros and cons of hospice. Hospice at the end of life isn't for everyone, and it certainly isn't for those who want to battle until their last breath. The essence of hospice is that it isn't about perpetuating life, it is about perpetuating quality of life.

Have your clients fill out a Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment, or POLST, form. The client completes this form based on his or her wishes, and the doctor signs it making the doctor legally bound to honor that request.

5. *What does someone as a parent bring to the "other talk"?*

As a parent, you bring permission to have the talk. The adult children hold back, because the parents don't want to talk about it. This talk needs to happen ASAP to avoid a crisis. These issues affect everyone, because death is imminent; there are no warning signs. This process is crises-driven, and parents don't always have the kids ready and willing to help. I kind of equate it to the kids being thrown into the deep end of the pool and now they have to learn to swim.

Even if someone has no children, they still need a close-knit group of friends or siblings they can rely upon.

6. *What is some practical financial planning advice offered in the book?*

The Other Talk covers much on financial planning. It covers where to live, how to manage financial needs, and legacy plans for family when the client dies.

Clients should establish spending priorities and explore various payment options, including reverse mortgages, lines of credit, and Medicaid waiver programs. A financial power of attorney needs to be established, and the re-working of asset and retirement income financial projections and the retirement plan itself.

Start with creating a binder or notebook (physical and/or electronic) that has all of the obvious papers in it. Each adult child should have a copy of the same binder. It should include the will or trust; medical information, such as advance directives, doctors, and medications; financial information; key documents; insurance for life, health, home, vehicles and boats; tax returns; banking information; proofs of ownership; investment, pension and loan information; credit card information; valuable items information; burial and funeral information .

Also include some less obvious things, such as managing day-to-day activities, titles to vehicles, safety deposit box key, and a list of all the doctors your clients have (by age 75, the average person will have between eight and 13 doctors). The adult children should meet with these doctors, know about the different medications each parent is on, and make sure they know where everything is. The children should also be meeting with you, their parents' financial planner, so they understand the entire financial picture and the strategies the client has been following.

7. *For an aging adult, deciding to give up the car keys can be an extremely difficult decision, and for the adult children, a difficult conversation to have with their parents. What advice do you have for easing this conversation?*

This is a tough one, and it's probably the first step in the role reversal process. And typically, it's not giving up the car keys; it's taking away the car keys, and often a relationship begins to build with animosity, and it just gets worse and worse and worse.

So first, get everyone involved beforehand (when I say everyone, I'm talking about the adult kids as well as the spouse). Sit down and say, "Okay

folks, you know how much I love to drive my little sports car, but there's going to come a time when I can't or I shouldn't, so let's talk about how we're going to manage that."

Next, set what I call trigger points and agree today what will cause me to stop driving. What I suggest is to make the trigger a third party. So for me, it's my doctor. When I go for my annual physical, if he decides that my mental acuity or physical acuity is such that I shouldn't be driving, then we both agreed in writing that I will stop. I literally have a document that I signed, my doctor signed, and my kids signed. I'll be honest, when it comes to that point, I'm sure going to fight it. But all they have to do is pull out that document and say, "Remember dad, we agreed to this." And I say, "You're right." But I wouldn't just stop there. I think in the conversation beforehand, you need to develop some solutions on what am I going to do once I can't drive.

For example, I live in downtown Chicago, so I will need to get much more involved in public transportation, which is easy to do in a city. But if you live in the suburbs or in the country like my parents did, that's not going to work; you need a plan B. In the case of my parents, we had nurses' aides at the house and they would do all the driving.

What we're saying is, your life isn't over; it's not that you can never leave the house. Part of losing the car keys is losing your independence. If we can get around that loss of independence, then for me, to stop driving just means I'm safer, the rest of the world is safer, and my life isn't over.

8. *It seems that starting an elder care and end-of-life conversation may be the hardest part. What advice do you have for financial planners to help prompt their boomer clients to start this conversation?*

You're absolutely right that getting started is the most difficult part. There

are a few steps to approaching this.

Typically, a confrontation begins between parent and child with the child starting to take control of things, and that causes a lot of angst and bad feelings. So I've come to the conclusion that we need to change the dynamic, change the transaction from the child taking control or the parent losing control and moving that into sharing control. If you can make that transition, then all of the sudden, a conversation is possible.

Secondly, make the conversation driven by the parent, not the adult child. Let the parent take the initiative and set a sense of urgency to having this conversation, much like the parent did with "the talk," you know, the one about the birds and the bees. You need to have a conversation, even though it's uncomfortable, because the consequences are much worse.

I think we should change the focus of the conversation. It's not about the end of your life. It's about the rest of your life. It's about the living that's going to come ahead and how we are going to manage it as a family, as a team. We need to make it more of an active corroboration between all members of the family.

The other part would be a third-party transaction. So rather than having the confrontation between me and you as adult child and parent, what you could do is say, "Why don't you have a look at this book, *The Other Talk*. When you're done looking at it, let's get together and talk about the book." That eliminates or at least reduces the potential for confrontation, because you and I are both focused on the book, not on our confrontation.

9. *I've heard you say you are a big proponent of full disclosure. What do you mean by that?*

I think you need to tell your kids about everything in your life, particularly in

the financial area. You need to share with them all your financial information. I get a lot of pushback from people who say, "Oh, I can't do that because A: I didn't save enough, or B: it's not their business, or C: they don't know how to handle money." The fact is, your whole financial situation is going to end up in their lap anyway, so why don't you, as a group, begin to plan for it?

10. *You will be speaking to planners about the concept of The Other Talk at FPA BE: Seattle in September. What do you hope financial planners take away from your session?*

I would hope they would take away that financial planning is certainly about managing your assets, but it's also about managing the cost of major life decisions; things like: How do I save for an uncertain future? How am I going to select my living arrangements between now and then? What's it going to cost? How do I manage my medical care in a time when there's going to be increasing competition for limited resources? And finally, how do I take charge at the end of my life?

I would hope they'd understand that there are three very powerful emotional barriers to an honest and open dialogue about the rest of your life, and that if you can't get past those, you're not going to have a conversation.

You have to get past the denial that both parents and adult children feel, and the role reversal that's inevitable when the child becomes the parent and the parent becomes the child, as well as that whole issue of losing control. If we can get to the point where we're sharing control and not losing control, then I think we've got something. ■

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