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How to Have More Meaningful Conversations

After my mom died, I missed the type of interactions that went beyond texts and small talk. Here's how I learned to connect more deeply with people

By Margie Zable Fisher, AARP | Published October 21, 2026



Illustration: Tara Anand

For years, my mother and I spoke on the phone every morning and often throughout the day. Our conversations didn't have to be profound to be meaningful. We talked about relationships, work, family, things that worried us and things that made us laugh.

What mattered was that we went beyond exchanging updates; we cared about what the other person thought and felt.

Whenever I saw her in conversation with others, I marveled at how she drew people out and really listened to what they said. When she died in 2023, my cousin Gary said to me, "Everyone loved Rona."

Mom told me I was a good listener, too. Maybe that's why we never got tired of talking with each other.



Margie Zable Fisher and her mother, Rona, at a birthday dinner in 2019. Photo courtesy of Margie Zable Fisher.

After she died, I struggled without the anchor of our morning calls. They were the start of my day. I didn't know anyone else I could call every morning.

I turned inward, and my phone calls with friends and family dwindled. I stayed in touch through weekly or monthly texts, but it started to feel more like checking something off a to-do list.

My in-person conversations with others changed, too. I got resentful and antsy during superficial discussions and started avoiding situations where I knew there would be a lot of small talk. I even started telling people I had a 90-minute limit on socializing because I was an introvert. But the truth was, I was tired of conversations that never went below the surface, and I didn't know how to steer them deeper.

It wasn't until I read about author and activist Gloria Steinem's "talking circles" after her recent death that I understood what I was looking for.

According to her foundation's website, Steinem's talking circles were based on "an ancient practice in which people gather in a circle to talk and listen." Beginning in her home in 1967, the conversations helped spark organizing and movement-building.

Steinem explained in an interview that in some Native American practices, an object was passed around and held by the speaker. What struck me was the idea of letting someone finish what they had to say without interrupting or jumping in with your own thoughts.

But giving someone the floor isn't enough. As Steinem said in a 2016 United Nations speech in New York: "There's nothing more important than listening to each other."

I've been thinking about how to bring more of that kind of listening — and connection — into my own conversations. Here's what I've learned.

Ask "magical questions." In an NPR interview, Priya Parker, author of The Art of Gathering, describes them as questions people enjoy answering and hearing others answer. Questions like "What was the first concert you went to, and who took you?" or "What is a path you almost took but didn't?" invite people to share their stories, leading to deeper connections.

Listen actively. Whether you're talking in person or on the phone, give the other person your full attention. Resist the urge to multitask or plan your response while they're speaking. Ask follow-up questions, and don't be afraid of a little silence. As Barnard College's guide to active listening explains, allowing someone time to think and respond can encourage a more thoughtful exchange.

Hold off on giving advice. When a friend shares a problem, it's tempting to jump in with your opinions or solutions. Instead, try one of my favorite questions: "Do you just want to vent, or do you want my advice?" Sometimes people don't want you to fix anything. They just want to be heard.

Share something vulnerable. You don't have to reveal your most personal secrets, but talking about something you're worried about, struggling with or afraid of can encourage a more meaningful exchange. According to an article from the University of California, Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, sharing fears, insecurities and regrets can help strengthen friendships.

Try an eight-minute phone call. Instead of sending another check-in text, ask a friend, "Do you have eight minutes to talk?" Featured in The New York Times' Happiness Challenge, the idea is that even a brief conversation can help us feel more connected. Setting aside just eight minutes can make picking up the phone feel more manageable.

I don't expect to have the kind of conversations I had with Mom ever again. And that's one of the hardest parts of grief: understanding just how much something meant when you can no longer have it.

But I'm starting to approach conversations differently. Recently I told a friend about something new I was trying in my business. I hesitated because I was opening myself up to criticism. Instead, she was incredibly supportive. I came away from that conversation feeling more connected to her and glad I'd shared something I might otherwise have kept to myself.

I'm also making an effort to replace some of my usual check-in texts with phone calls. And instead of asking, "How are you?" and accepting "Fine," I'm trying to ask something more magical. What are you excited for that we haven't talked about? What have you been thinking about a lot lately? Is there something you've been wanting to talk about but haven't had the chance to?

And when they answer, I really listen.

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Margie Zable Fisher is a freelance writer covering the issues, challenges and possibilities of life after 50. Her work has appeared in AARP The Magazine, The New York Times and Fortune, among other publications. She is the coauthor (with her mother) of The Cabernet Club, a novel about friendship, reinvention and making the rest of your life the best of your life.