

Researchers aim to motivate family conversations about health

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Have you been struggling to get a good night's sleep lately? Or did you take your daily medication this morning? If so, have you shared the details with your parents or adult children?

If you haven't talked with your family about these health topics, you're not alone, according to a study by researchers in Penn State's College of Information Sciences and Technology. In fact, most adults aged 65 and older and living independently do not share information about sleep (91%) or medication (82%) with their adult children, while 71% of adult children don't discuss this information with their aging parents.

"Our study unveiled factors that motivate and discourage [family members](#) from sharing information about sleep and medication," said Jomara Sandbulte, who earned her doctorate from the College of IST in May and is the lead author of the study. She is currently an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota Duluth.

"This is important because families play a role in managing individuals' health," Sandbulte continued, "Yet, some intergenerational families face obstacles in supporting each other because family members may decide not to share information. How can family members provide or receive support if they are unaware that it is needed?"

Most often, the study participants cited lack of time or interest during short and limited conversations as reasons for not discussing these topics. However, researchers found that major medical events, such as hospitalization, or minor health-related changes, such as beginning a new medication, could motivate them to initiate conversations about sleep and medication with others in their family. These events, labeled as "inciting incidents," appear to set in motion conversations about health among family members, according to the researchers.

"Our interviewees explained that conversations about sleep and medication are generally atypical because they are not interesting or valuable topics for [conversation](#) unless changes arise," said Sandbulte. "Thus, inciting incidents can be used as an interpretive lens for making sense of when and why health information sharing behavior changes."

Further, inciting incidents appear to be a key dynamic in the regulation of family health, said John Carroll, distinguished professor of [information sciences](#) and technology and principal investigator of the study.

"Health of family members is inherently a realm of collaboration, but also of tensions around personal boundaries and established family roles," said Carroll.

The findings could be a useful means for [human-computer interaction](#) (HCI) researchers that aim to promote health [information](#) sharing and collaboration in the family context. Additionally, the study results could inform future design explorations to consider family conversations as an analog way of tracking [health information](#) and examine ways to translate conversations into a tracking system, such as a wearable device or mobile application.

"We think that the concept of inciting incidents is more important for submerged health conversation topics which do not get raised as regularly as common health-related topics, like nutrition and physical activity," said Sandbulte. "Given that, the potential impact of this study is to inspire other researchers on using these natural [health](#) events and changes as a constructive and innovative means for design."

For the study, the researchers interviewed individuals aged 65 and older who live independently, as well as adult children living independently from their elderly parents. None of the participants came from the same [family](#).

Jordan Beck, vice president of product at The Juice and former assistant research professor at the College of IST; and Eun Kyoung Choe, assistant professor in the College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland and former assistant professor at the College of

IST, also collaborated on the project.

The study was supported by the National Science Foundation, and the researchers' paper, "Inciting Incidents: How Can We Motivate Family Conversations about Health?" appeared in the *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* earlier this year.

More information: Jomara Sandbulte et al. Inciting Incidents: How Can We Motivate Family Conversations about Health?, *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/10447318.2020.1720442](https://doi.org/10.1080/10447318.2020.1720442)

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