

When families do not agree

Strategies in minimizing conflict and addressing caregiving issues in a supportive manner

Family dynamics and caregiving

Family conflict can often be part of family caregiving situations. Everyone approaches family caregiving issues differently. Individual family members' opinions about what is best for the person with dementia can vary greatly. On top of this, the history of family dynamics can re-emerge bringing out old patterns of behaving and unresolved tensions.

Most common areas of conflict

a. Disagreements and uncertainty over diagnosis:

It may be that not all family members will agree that a relative has dementia. In fact, it is common for family members to have very different ideas about what's wrong with their relative and what should be done about it. One family member may be refusing to get involved and say, "*There is nothing wrong with mother.*" It is important to remember that when there is a diagnosis of dementia, all family members will feel a sense of loss. Denial is the first stage of grieving and family members may:

- deny that anything is wrong because they are unable to accept the reality of the diagnosis
- disagree with the diagnosis as a means of protecting themselves from facing a relative's death and their own loss
- react with bitterness and anger

These reactions can lay the groundwork for family conflict.

b. **Care needs:** Most often, discord surfaces within families from perceptions over who does or who should provide care and what type of care should be provided. Unequal division of caregiving duties can cause conflict. Generally, one relative takes on the primary role of caregiving. This may be because he or she lives closest to the person with dementia, is perceived as having less work or fewer family obligations, or is considered the "favorite" relative of the person with dementia. Regardless of the reasons, this situation can lead the overburdened primary caregiver to feel frustrated and resentful and other relatives to feel uninformed and left out.

c. **Planning for the future:** If the person with dementia has not planned ahead, there are decisions that will need to be made which include medical decisions, managing finances, and enforcing end-of-life choices. How this is decided and carried out can raise tensions between family members.

Communication tips that will help prevent conflict

- **Communicate regularly.** Don't allow weeks to turn into months and years of not communicating with family members you feel should take a vested interest in your relative's condition and care.

Share responsibly. Consider each family member's preferences, resources and abilities. Some family members may provide hands-on care or may be more comfortable with respite care, household chores or errands. Others may be better suited for handling financial or legal issues.

- **Offer help even if you live far away.** Check in often to see how things are going and to offer whatever assistance you can. Ask about how the caregiver is doing and be a sounding board for frustrations and concerns. Be patient if the caregiver needs to vent.
- **Ask for help.** If you feel overburdened by the responsibility of caregiving, inform the rest of your family members (without complaining or blaming others). Your family members may assume you're doing just fine handling everything on your own unless you tell them what challenges you're facing and specific ways they can help.
- **Empathize.** Difficult situations affect everyone differently, so try to understand your relative's point of view before getting angry or upset. Approaching the issue this way will help you suggest an appropriate solution.
- **Make decisions together.** Even if you serve as the primary caregiver of your parents, involve your relatives when you need to make a major care decision. Taking their thoughts and opinions into account will help to eliminate any hard feelings, grudges or resentments.
- **Leave childhood rivalries behind.** Stepping back and realizing how unresolved issues from long ago influence your present relationships may put a helpful new perspective on your current situation.

Resolution of differences

- **Plan regular face-to-face family meetings:** Include everyone who's part of the caregiving team, including family friends and other close contacts.
- **Be honest.** Talking about your feelings in an open, constructive manner can help defuse tension.
- **Don't criticize.** There are many "right" ways to provide care. Respect each caregiver's abilities, style and values.
- **Consider mediation.** Sometimes family issues become too complicated or emotionally charged to solve on your own. A third-party resource, particularly a professional such as a counselor, social worker or other professional can provide an impartial voice of reason.

Only when families work together as a team can the person with dementia receive the best love and care possible. Remember, you are not alone. Call your local Alzheimer Society to receive information and support.

Further information on this topic

Visit the following websites:

- Family Caregiver Support Network: www.caregiversupportnetwork.org
- Full circle of Care: www.fullcirclecare.org
- Family conflict in dementia: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed
- Helping families through dementia care-related conflicts: www.socialworktoday.com

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