

Keeping the Peace: Avoiding Family Conflict When Caregiving

Judith S. Parnes
LCSW, CMC
Executive
Director



Families caring for elderly loved ones face numerous stressors that can cause conflict. A recent study indicates that in 43% of US families one sibling has the responsibility for providing most or all of the care. Caregiving can bring families together, can tear families apart and in some cases it can do both. Although there may be tremendous financial, physical and emotional demands, caregiving does not mean that conflict is inevitable. In fact, if managed well, the experience of caring for an older family member has the potential to bring relatives closer together over a common bond.

Common causes of family tension and conflict include:

Unresolved Childhood Rivalry

Issues: Mature adults often revert back to childhood roles when families get together. Even as a successful, capable adult, if you believed your sister was the “favored” child, when dealing with your family

and sister you may suddenly become that jealous, young child again.

Disagreement About What is Best:

It is very common for family members to have different thoughts about how much care is needed and what should be done about it. A loved one’s illness and need for care can cause many questions for a family. Who provides the additional care? How expensive is it? Is there a “team” approach or does one sibling carry most of the responsibility alone. Prolonged discussions and arguments, differing opinions and the increasing care needed can exacerbate the situation.

Disagreements over a loved one’s condition and capabilities:

As our loved ones age, they often don’t see the need for assistance. They are used to deciding what is best for themselves and want to remain in charge. Add to this the conflict that sometimes arises when siblings “take sides” regarding a loved one’s abilities. One family member is convinced that their parent is no longer capable of driving, while another argues that is exactly what is needed in order to maintain their independence.

Money and financial matters:

How to pay for a family member’s care is often a huge cause of tension. The recent recession left many older adults depleted of their savings and retirement. Financial concerns can influence decisions about where a person should live, whether or not a particular medical intervention is needed and how much outside help is potentially available.

Stress: Adult caregivers who have their own jobs, are raising children or may also be caring for their spouse can often become overwhelmed when elderly family members need help. In fact, 46% of caregivers say their sibling relationships have deteriorated since becoming a primary caregiver. Resolving family conflict is not always easy. The following steps can help you recognize and avoid some common issues when sharing the care of a loved one.

Hold regular family

discussions: Start with the first one as soon as caregiving becomes a consideration, initiate regular family communication with everyone. The goal is to share information and make decisions as a group if possible, or at least have a consensus of opinion. This communication may be by e-mail, but face-to-face is

preferable if possible or at a minimum conference calling allows for dialogue. For some families increased communication can be a source of support and a forum to address and resolve disagreements.

Talk and listen: Most loved ones are very concerned about maintaining their independence, often to the point that they forgo getting help and support. For some this can lead to disaster without a professionally trained Geriatric Care Manager or Elder Care Counselor. Many people don't want to accept help or take suggestions because they feel they may then lose control of their lives. The most successful strategy in this scenario is to convey that you want what is best for your loved one and they need to do this to make it easier in the

long run for them *and you*. Explaining how not accepting necessary help from you or your siblings puts an increased burden on everyone involved. The problem here is in defining "what is best". Do adult children always know what is best?

Divide the labor: Sometimes the separation of caregiving tasks is easier when divided by a family member's interests, skills and availability instead of an "equal division of duties". An out of state sibling won't be able to help with day to day care, but can come for scheduled extended times to give the local caregiver respite, or possibly take on bill paying electronically removing that responsibility from the "local" **caregiver's** list. However control over the assets and financial management is very frequently one of the major

stressors in family elder care. Many families fight over how to spend or not spend all of Mom or Dad's money.

Seek Professional Guidance: A trained certified Geriatric Care Manager can help resolve disagreements and manage difficult care-giving dilemmas. A relatively new profession, Geriatric Care Managers or Elder Care Consultant starts with a comprehensive assessment of your specific situation and then develop a plan of care and family plan of action including options and resources you may not be aware of. This **trained neutral** third party can often help families resolved their differences with the focus on the elder persons needs and appropriate services available. **Certainly the goal is keeping the peace and avoiding family conflict when caregiving.**

Judith S. Parnes, L.C.S.W., C.M.C., Gerontologist and Elder Care Consultant is Executive Director of Elder Life Management, Inc., Ocean, NJ. They provide quality elder care planning, management and Medicaid application services to older adults and their families. Please visit www.elderlifemanagement.org or call (732) 493-8080 for more information