



Resolving Conflict between Family Caregivers and Their Elders

Frequently, family caregivers experience conflicts over issues involving independence, personal safety, personal values and end-of-life decisions. In fact, there are very few issues which can alienate even the closest family members from one another more than eldercare.

In dealing with older family members, it has been suggested that rather than utilizing a confrontational approach, caregivers should respect their elders' right to make poor decisions and use the resulting consequences as a "positive" to help examine and facilitate alternatives to prevent such problems in the future resolution.

There are several issues which are "hot buttons" for controversy when dealing with older family members. Today's older adults are a very independent group of people. Many were immigrants, and their views were flavored by their survival of the Great Depression. The erosion of that independence can create many problems for them.

Adult children frequently jump in and try to take over for their parents at the first sign of any frailty, while their parents tend to fend off any intervention as long as possible. At the first signs of perceived "confusion", family conflicts over driving, living alone, and handling personal affairs occur sooner rather than later.

Sometimes, the conflict is as basic as the reluctance or unwillingness of both parents and children to openly discuss a problem. Some families have a harmonious history of problem-solving and openness; others barely communicate at all, and seldom do throughout their lifetimes. If families have historically approached disagreements in a spirit of resolution, they are likely to do so with regard to caregiving issues as well; if they haven't, their ability to resolve these issues will certainly be inhibited.

Caregivers must also realize that basic personality characteristics don't change with age. People who have been difficult, controlling and confrontational all their lives tend to be the same way as they age. As a result, it may take extreme patience and understanding--putting oneself in the older person's shoes, so to speak--to truly understand what perceived loss of control means to the older person.

Some suggestions for dealing with potential conflict situations include:

- 1.** Determine the older persons' own style and pattern of coping with situations and try to resolve conflict by using that style (which they usually feel most comfortable with) as a catalyst to get discussions moving.
- 2.** Use the "favorite child" approach to facilitate discussions and decision-making. Often, a family member who has not been a direct caregiver or involved on a day-to-day basis may have more influence in suggesting alternatives which are acceptable to the older person.
- 3.** In matters of influence, an impartial third party may also be helpful, including close and respected friends, physicians, clergy, or attorneys.
- 4.** For extremely difficult and volatile situations, encourage open discussion to a point and then use the services of a facilitator, whose opinion is respected by both parties, to help resolve the conflict (e.g., a professional social worker, geriatric care manager, psychologist, etc.).
- 5.** The passage of time has a way of assuaging anger, frustration and hostilities that may arise when families are under stress. Suggesting an idea and then revisiting that suggestion on one or more occasions can help overcome resistance by planting a seed and ultimately facilitating acceptance.
- 6.** Sometimes, caregivers need the support and encouragement of others to help them through difficult periods. Support groups can provide an outlet and resource to help caregivers vent their frustrations and concerns, while reinforcing ideas and suggestions which members offer from first-hand experience.

For further information on conflict management and resolution, contact Quest EAP at 1-800-364-6352. Ask for our Eldercare Specialist contact information.