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Avoid Family Conflicts

By Marcy Maler, MA, Care and Education Specialist

When a family member is diagnosed with dementia, the effect it can have on the entire family can be overwhelming. The diagnosis can trigger a range of emotions—denial, anger, fear, frustration, sadness, or depression. There also are many decisions to make, ranging from treatment, care needs, living arrangements, finances, to end-of-life care. As a result, family conflicts commonly arise.

Each family has its own history of relationships, roles, and life challenges that can affect how individuals will react to a diagnosis of dementia. The task at hand is not to “fix the family” but to get everyone on the same team to care for someone who is ill. Consider strategies that will promote cooperation and lessen the potential for family conflicts. How do we navigate these?

Educate yourself. Learn as much as you can about the disease and the challenges that you will be facing. Share this knowledge and the resources you used to obtain it with your family members.

Communication is the key to working successfully with people. Initiate family meetings. Find a space that is comfortable and convenient and has few distractions. Be honest and informative, giving everyone a chance to express themselves. Feelings need to be expressed and acknowledged. There are many decisions to be made and much work to be done, so don't try to solve all problems at once.

Consider holding your first meeting without the diagnosed person present, so family members can openly share thoughts and feelings that might be painful for him



to hear; then hold a second meeting with the diagnosed person present, so he too can express his reactions.

Cooperation. Identify and make a list of current and anticipated caregiving needs and then designate supportive roles that each family member can take. Share responsibilities; you don't have to do everything alone. Assigning realistic supportive roles to family members will definitely reduce caregiver stress.

It is unlikely that you will be able to divide caregiving among you evenly, but try to match each relative's abilities, resources, and emotional capacity to the appropriate task. While one might provide hands-on or live-in care, others might be responsible for respite care, household chores, errands, or perhaps to research care facilities. Hopefully, your loved one will have designated someone to handle financial or legal issues, but if not, designate your most capable relative. Use a centralized calendar or LotsaHelpingHands.com to keep responsibilities straight and everyone on the same page.

Document problems and progress. Keep a journal to share with your relatives and to remind all that you are not “just imagining” things. This will help clarify



Tips & Tools

Prepare an agenda for a Family Meeting

- The latest report from the physician; changes in medications; condition of patient.
- Sharing feelings about death, dying, sadness, confusion, anger, and guilt.
- What does the person who is ill want and need?
- Daily caregiving needs. Where should the patient live? Is it time for an assisted living facility or nursing home?
- How much time does each family member have to visit?
- Financial update and concerns. Cost of care? How much work can family members miss? What financial help is available from outside the family?
- Who will make major decisions? Who will have power of attorney, medical power of attorney, etc.?
- Support needs of the primary caregiver? Help with meals, shopping, laundry, cleaning, and doctors

misperceptions and avoid arguments.

Ask for help when you need it. A caregiver should never worry about “being inadequate” or “selfish” if she asks for help. Caregiving is a major undertaking. Most of your friends and family want to help, but do not know how. If a friend enjoys cooking, ask him to help with meal preparation. A family member who likes to drive might be able to drive your loved-one to the doctor or to the park. Identify and express your needs.

The physical and emotional demands that are placed upon caregivers impacts their general health and increases risk for chronic disease, health-related physiological changes, and even death. If you can’t get enough help from family and friends, there are agencies who can provide care in your home or watch your loved-one at a respite center in your area. Caring for a person with dementia poses special challenges.

Maintain your supportive system. Once you have an infrastructure for cooperative care in your family, continue to hold family meetings to discuss care and other relevant issues. By meeting regularly (perhaps monthly), you can address a few concerns at a time. Avoid long meetings, welcome each other’s input, and be prepared for any necessary changes in care.

Technology can help. A conference call, the use of a speakerphone, Skype, a video, an audio recording, and the use of email or text can help even the long-distance relatives keep up to date with how things are going.

Create an agenda and share it before you meet. Make it clear that the goal



of a meeting is to evaluate care and needs, identify problems, and consider solutions. Be open to compromise and possibilities you hadn’t considered on your own.

Be inclusive. It is important to include everyone who is part of the caregiving team, including family, friends, neighbors, paid

caregivers, or social workers. Talk about your feelings in an open, constructive manner—during both family meetings and informal conversations. If you are angry or stressed, say so. Express your feelings without blaming or shaming anyone else by using “I” statements. For example, you might say, “I’m feeling overwhelmed with juggling my own schedule and dad’s appointments,” rather than, “You just don’t understand what it’s like to manage dad’s schedule.” Listen to and acknowledge other family members’ feelings too.

Learn the beauty of compromise. Since you are part of a collaborative team, it is important to acknowledge that there are multiple ways of attaining a goal. Respecting each person’s individuality and her particular situation, helps to create acceptance and allows for creative solutions. By being open to alternative perspectives, you may get part of what you feel is necessary.

Do not criticize. Be especially supportive of family members who are responsible for daily, hands-on care. Keep in mind the desires and wishes of the person with dementia. There is more than *one way* to provide care. Be respectful of each caregiver’s abilities and values. There are many “right” ways to provide care.

While it is natural for family conflicts to arise when a loved one is diagnosed with dementia, be mindful of ways to mitigate them. The diagnosis itself is stressful enough; families should work through conflicts together so that they can move on to more important things—caring for their loved one and enjoying the time together as much as possible.