

Five Ways To Keep Family Elder Care Conferences From Spinning Out Of Control

Gathering the family together to discuss what to do about mom can light the fuse of smoldering family issues. Here are five basic ground rules. Rule #1: Put your loved one's needs first. This rule seems plain enough, but when you bring a family together, you bring decades of sibling rivalry, accepted beliefs and long standing issues of trust and confidence (or lack there of!). Rule #2: Invite everyone with a role in the outcome. Yes, even your arrogant, pushy sister, that "good for nothing" brother who can't hold a job and is always "borrowing" money from mom and your busy body aunt. Include everyone. Even if they live far away, are abrasive, doesn't seem to care, and those that never call or visits. It's best to have everyone physically in the same room. If that's not practical, set up a speaker phone for out-of-towners. The family members providing emotional support need to be there, too. Leaving someone out eaves the door open for a disgruntled family member to wreak havoc on your plans later. Rule #3: Agree to cooperate and listen to each other. Even if you don't like each other, it's best to put that feeling aside and focus on your mom. Talk from your heart, not from the past. Using "I" language opens up the channels of communication. Using "you" language shuts it down. "I" messages speak from personal feelings. Saying "I want to do my part but have concerns about being able to contribute because my father in law just moved in with us after his wife died. I'm taking on more of the responsibilities at home while my job has become particularly demanding. I'm not sure how much I can spread myself right now" is more effective than the "you" message of "You just don't understand our situation. If you are already caring for one old timer in the house, you wouldn't expect be able to handle the resposability of caring for another parent at the same time!" Rule #4: Invite your parent. Some professionals suggest meeting first without the parent to get the family on the same page. Others disagree and suggest having mom or dad from the start. What is clear is you must include the elder at some point early in the process. If your mom or dad is mentally competent, they should be there. Remember rule #1. The reason you've called the family conference is for their financial, physical and mental well being. Your loved one needs to tell you about his or her preferences, likes, dislikes, worries and fears. Often, when other family members describe what they've observed it's a real eye-opener to other family members and the parent. Hearing a truth from several people at the same time may be hurtful to hear. It's more likely to sink in than when it's heard one person at a time. Rule #5: Use a facilitator to defuse family land mines. The presence of someone outside the family like a respected family friend, geriatric care manager or minister can provide structure, organization and momentum. Plus, it can help you step around all those family land mines. Having a non-family member present also tends to put us on better behavior. Hiring a care manager to facilitate adds an important expertise: knowledge about available community services and their best use. You enjoy these three important benefits by following these basic guidelines: 1. You can keep the discussion focused, 2. Every one's tempers stay balanced 3. The family concentrates on what's most important: seeing your mom or dad gets good care.

About the Author

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