

## How to Hold a Family Meeting

Caring for a someone with Alzheimer's is more successful when the whole family is involved and everyone agrees with the care plan. Here are some tips for using family meetings to make effective care decisions.

### Select who will attend.

- Include the person with Alzheimer's and get her input, especially in major decisions, if she can communicate preferences, respond to ideas and is willing to attend. Meet without her only if the person would disrupt the meeting or find it too distressing.
  - *If she attends the meeting, do not talk about her as if she were not there! Decide who will sit beside her, and speak so she can understand.*
- Those expected to carry out decisions must attend. It is unfair to decide without them.
- Include those living afar, by speakerphone if necessary. Face-to-face is better.
- To arrive at genuine agreement, it is important for all points of view to be heard. Include those who will disagree with you, unless they would sabotage reasonable discussion.
- If you cannot call the meeting yourself, recruit an influential sibling to talk to the others.

### Meet at a convenient time & place, free of distractions, and set-aside for this one purpose.

- Not Thanksgiving dinner!
- Set aside at least an hour and a half. Limiting the time helps focus discussion.
- Around the time of diagnosis is a good time to start meeting as a family. Then major care questions emerge, and family members are motivated to participate.
- If the meeting occurs shortly after diagnosis or a family crisis, make time at the beginning for everyone simply to air their feelings and digest recent events. How have events impacted them personally? What does the diagnosis mean to them?
- Unfortunately, many leave planning until a crisis, when everyone is under stress and options are more constricted. Good planning helps you anticipate and manage crises.

### Keep the goals clear.

- The two core issues are:
  - *What care does Mom/Dad need now and in the near future?*
  - *What help does the primary caregiver need to be effective?*
- Agree on what is needed before offering solutions (there may be many solutions).
- List care needs in order of importance: health and safety (getting lost, driving, medical care and medication management); managing difficult behaviors, assistance with personal care and finances; activities and social stimulation. (NOTE: Respite and support for the primary caregiver is an essential part of each of these items)

### **Prepare for the meeting.**

- Gather needed information: doctor's recommendations, powers of attorney, finances.
- The Alzheimer's Association has excellent brochures on many aspects of dementia care, including legal and financial issues, planning activities, caregiver stress, etc.
- Some hold several meetings: with doctor, attorney, social worker, and just among themselves.

### **Agree on ground rules to facilitate decision-making.**

- Decide on just one or two things to be done. Long lists discourage action.
- Get someone to keep the discussion on track and another person to record decisions. A neutral person, such as a family friend, might be best.
- Start by sharing observations on changes you have noticed. This respects the views of each and forms a foundation for identifying needs and solutions.
- Set a definite beginning and ending time for the discussion.
- Spend much of the time discussing how you will implement the things decided. Meetings that neglect this are like New Year resolutions—just good intentions!

### **Agree on ground rules to help family members get along.**

- Speak only for yourself. ("I think such and such, because..."). Avoid giving advice!
- Keep personal differences off the table. Deal with current needs, not past grievances. If personal issues are getting in the way of reaching agreement, consider family counseling in order to find common ground.
- Allow for difficult emotions such as grief and anger. But take a break before making decisions if members are angry or distressed.
- Encourage everyone to express thoughts and feelings while together, not later.
- Avoid getting bogged down in details; list questions for later consideration.
- Serve simple food afterwards, and enjoy being together as a family.

### **Decide who will do what by when.**

- Make sure everyone has a role that works for him or her. There is room for all: gathering information, providing hands-on care, moral support, and money.
- Avoid overloading the primary caregiver, even if she is willing.
- Set up clear lines of communication. Email is a useful tool for keeping everyone informed.
- Decide when to meet again. This is a long journey for a family, with many stages.

### **Use a professional facilitator if necessary.**

An outside facilitator frees you up to participate fully in the discussion. Your Alzheimer's Association Chapter may have a family consultant available, 1-800-272-3900. Rev.7/29/08 jt