Managing Conflict within Families
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Common causes of conflict in families facing eldercare challenges:

- Frustration
- Lack of experience/knowledge base
- Family histories
- Fear/anxiety
- Conflicts of interest among family members
- Control issues
- Religious beliefs/personal credos
- Lack of knowledge of what elder truly wants
- Emotional/mental health issues among family members

Traditional family meetings – helpful elements for a productive meeting:

- Someone must initiate and organize – whom?
- Someone must take charge of meeting – whom?
- Safe space, convenient time
- Fair notice to all involved parties (and generally to those who believe they should be involved as well)
- Agreements to be civil and to treat each other with respect
- Respect for honesty
- Must allow expression of emotions and frustrations
- Leader must keep focus on critical issues

The specter of incapacity and how it impacts family decision-making:

- To what extent can the potentially impaired elder (or other family member) participate?
- Identify surrogate decision-makers under the law; they may need to be part of the discussion
- Has the impaired elder given guidance in the past regarding what he/she would wish for in this situation?
- Does the narrative of the elder’s life help the family reflect on the elder’s values and beliefs and guide them toward a decision that honors the belief system of the elder?

The “domino effect”: If the family puts one change in place, what vital pieces of the puzzle suddenly change for other family members/caregivers? A major decision usually impacts more than one person. Can the family envision how the proposed changes will play out?
Why do family “chats” so often fail to be productive and to reduce conflict and solve problems?

- Family members can’t get past their personal histories
- Perhaps no one can even get a quorum to meet
- Family afraid to deal with conflicts of interest, or overreacts to them (neither style helps)
- Family members unable to create a “safe space” to have stressful, emotional discussions
- When things get heated, some family members may refuse to recognize the authority of the meeting leader, who is after all just …. “My little sister, or the brother who never like me, or my stepmom”, etc – no inherent authority
- Families aren’t democracies – a majority vote can’t force the elder to comply with a family decision
- Family may not have an adequate knowledge base of care issues and resources to address current challenges
- The meeting leader/organizer, whether a family member or an involved professional such as a social worker, attorney or pastor, can’t be neutral. Family members come with their own agendas and attitudes and are anything but neutral in the bosom of the family. Non-family professionals who attend became involved in the situation as advocates for someone in the family and cannot ethically abandon those roles, so family members quite reasonably do not believe they all will be heard and treated equally, despite the best intent of the professional

What happens when the family can’t work together to help the elder at the heart of the family controversy?

- Elder may not get the physical or financial assistance required; he/she may not get the emotional and social support needed (worst case: the elder may die alone and in need)
- Concerned neighbors or others may involve Adult Protect Services to help the elder (sometimes appropriate, always intrusive)
- Family fighting at such a time of need may break the elder’s heart
- The family may fracture to the point where members will never reconcile (no more Christmas dinners, graduation parties or even a supportive funeral when the elder dies)
- If the capacity for self-care or financial management is an issue, then guardianship may be needed
- The family may fail to honor the elder’s wishes, beliefs and values – the essence of the elder at the heart of the controversy

A new tool: elder mediation (sometimes more a facilitated family meeting than a mediation – depends on the needs of the family). An outside neutral mediator, with knowledge of elder care issues, serves as a facilitator/mediator for a family discussion. How does it help?
• Just like when we’re kids, family members often behave better with an outsider present
• Professional mediator/facilitator uses mediation techniques and expectations to create a safe space for discussion, to permit expressions of opinion and emotions, to control destructive behaviors and to keep discussion focused
• Elder mediator educates the elder and the family on options that may meet the elder’s needs, which allows the family to develop their own proposed solutions for discussion
• Mediator assists the family to reality check their ideas and to identify “next steps” to explore those they believe have the most promise
• Mediator continues to assist family communication as designated members complete the “homework assignments” they accept during the family meeting and report in (e.g., seeking legal or financial advice, talking to a doctor, interviewing home care agencies, touring care facilities, etc)
• Mediator/facilitator assists the family to finalize their agreed-upon plan of action

**Goals of elder mediation:** *To resolve family conflict while preserving family relationships*

If you have further questions about elder mediation, please contact Dee Bergan at E-Senior Services/AIM Aging Issues Mediation, 972-809-0247, or deeb@e-seniorservices.com.

If you’re interested in training to be an elder mediator, Ms. Bergan will be teaching a class in elder mediation at SMU’s Center for Conflict Resolution starting in October 2012. Contact the Center for Conflict Resolution directly to learn more about their graduate mediation program; see [http://smu.edu/education/disputeresolution/](http://smu.edu/education/disputeresolution/). If you have questions about the specific class content, feel free to contact Ms. Bergan.

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