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Ways to Avoid Conflict with Siblings While Caring for an Aging Parent

1. Think about, and talk about, family history and dynamics, and how they might affect caregiving. When we get together with our families, many of us tend to slip into our old roles. Maybe one person was the “responsible” one, one was the “social” one, one was the “helpless” one. But do those roles define you today? And more importantly, can you take a fresh look at who your siblings are now in the context of how these roles and assumptions can affect care for your parents?

2. Consider that care for a parent is a shared responsibility. A key concern is who will be the primary care provider(s) and what support other family members can provide. Since this is a role that can progress to more than a full-time job, this is an important decision. Rather than letting assumptions become default decisions (e.g., Barbara is oldest so she will be in charge, or Max needs a place to stay, so he’ll take care of mom), really consider who is most able, willing, skilled, and emotionally prepared to fill this role. Then consider what other family members can contribute in time or money.

3. To help reach the goal of effective shared decision-making, hold a family meeting. Family meetings are a way for siblings, parents and other concerned relatives or friends to try to clarify the situation, work out conflicts and set up a care plan that, ideally, all can agree upon. If the meeting is likely to be contentious, or if you want an experienced, objective voice to guide it, involve a facilitator such as a social worker, counselor, geriatric care manager or trusted outside party who will ensure that all participants have a chance to be heard. You may need more than one meeting. And although emotions might run high, it’s possible to conduct a productive meeting by following a few guidelines:

- Set an agenda for the meeting and keep to it.
- Focus on the here and now. Try not to bring up past or unrelated issues.
- Share your feelings with siblings instead of making accusations.
- Listen and respect the opinions of all participants. Give everyone time to speak.
- Share all information. If possible, get a professional assessment of your parent’s condition from a doctor, social worker or geriatric care manager and send the report to all participants before the meeting.
- As time family meetings to help keep everyone abreast of care issues and information.

4. Understand and respect that your brothers and sisters might have different ideas about the care your parent needs. It's hard to accept that your parent now needs your help. Unless there's a sudden crisis like a stroke, adjusting to this new reality takes time. Some adult children have to work through their denial that anything serious is wrong. Others might feel reluctant to get involved, fearing they are "meddling" in their parent's life.

Yet, to the primary caregiver, the person who is present day-to-day, it's clear that his or her parent is less and less able to handle everyday needs. They see that Mom requires assistance with grocery shopping and cooking, that transportation and bill paying are problems, or advancing memory loss or fading eyesight or painful joints keep her from normal activities. Her needs are evident and most likely will become more intense.

Working through differences: communication plays a critical role.

- If you've held family meetings, everyone concerned should have a clear idea of the medical status of your parent. Focus on the facts.
- REALLY listen to what your siblings have to say. Be willing to compromise and to try new solutions, as long as no one's safety is jeopardized.
- For the doubters, it may be helpful for them to spend a weekend or even a day as a sole caregiver, to get a first-hand view of the issues.
- Be straightforward about financial issues. Finances are a key component in long-term caregiving, affecting where your parent lives, whether paid outside help is available, whether placement in a facility is a suitable or desirable option, or whether home care is manageable with family support. Overseeing bill-paying and dealing with Medicare and other health care bills is a job in itself, and can be delegated as such.
- Let your siblings know that their help is needed and wanted. Be direct and specific about what tasks you need help with. Even if they live far away, siblings can help with finances, can provide virtual companionship to your parent with frequent phone calls and Skype, or can provide occasional respite or substitute care.
- Keep communication lines open.