

Caregiving Corner

Resources & Solutions for Caregivers

Caregiving Conversations with Family Members

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Decisions regarding caregiving require both extensive planning and the opportunity for involvement by all family members impacted by the situation. The determination that caregiving will take place and that willing caregivers have accepted responsibility are preliminary steps to what may be the two largest obstacles: entertaining the viewpoints of family members and accommodating the preferences of the care recipient. Most people overlook both obstacles by erroneously assuming that first, the care recipient is happy to be receiving the care, and second, that family members will defer to the caregiver when decisions are made. In order for meaningful family discussions to take place on the subject of caregiving, these assumptions must be forgotten.

Much is written and discussed regarding the stress of caregivers, dealing with multiple roles, and the added burden of caregiving to the caregiver, but very little is ever mentioned about the perspective of the care recipient. While these considerations should not be downplayed, what do we know about how the aging parent or spouse feels about having to be cared for? Some family members automatically assume that the aging person is thankful for the care – most are – but there is plenty of room for the care recipient to also feel managed, belittled, or completely incapable of making their own decisions. The latter feeling is the basis for needing to establish a solid foundation for any family discussions related to caregiving.

Changes in the American family, specifically the long distance that now often exists between family members, can make regular involvement in decision-making somewhat cumbersome. Larger families can also be challenging due to the varying viewpoints held by each of the members. Those family members who will have a more active role in caregiving should make a concerted effort to include other members by soliciting their opinion or offering them ways to provide caregiving from afar.

Long distance family members should keep in mind, however, that it is detrimental to both the caregiver and recipient to pass quick judgments based on infrequent visits or telephone contacts. These types of communication do not provide an accurate picture of the caregiving dynamics that are taking place within their family. Those caregivers should also remember that there are two perspectives – that of the caregiver and that of the care recipient – involved in any caregiving situation. As with any major decision, family input is best facilitated when planning is possible rather than in a last-minute crisis when emotions are unpredictable.

The often overlooked perspective in caregiving discussions is that of the person who will be receiving care. For that older adult, a health or mental decline, regardless of whether it is sudden or gradual, has resulted in them requiring assistance – an effect that is often viewed as undesirable. Families who are understanding of the reluctance of their

loved one to be cared for are more successful at making effective caregiving decisions than those families who cannot figure out the senior's expressions of anger, despair, and independence.

A simple tool for including all persons involved in the caregiving process is a 'needs versus wants' spectrum. Family members indicate what they 'need' to have for their aging loved one ("we need to know that they are being well cared for") and the aging parent indicates their 'wants' or preferences ("I want to live in a retirement community"). By placing the needs and wants on a spectrum based on priority, the entire family is able to see the opportunities for compromise and the issues which will require more discussion. Some preferences may seem unimportant to other family members, but those should not be discounted, particularly those wishes of the care recipient.

Though diplomatic discourse is often hard to find in some families, it does set the tone for how the care recipient will feel about being in the position of changing roles with their adult children. If you are a caregiver, ask yourself this: when was the last time you asked the person you are caring for if they had preferences that were not being considered. And, if you are currently being cared for by someone, when was the last time that you openly discussed with them your desires regarding caregiving?