

Families Talking Together

As individuals age and become more dependent, families may experience changes in relationships and have difficulty dealing with these changes. In some cases, this can lead to stress and conflict within the family.

You may think, *“But our family gets along fine and Mom and Dad are doing OK, so why should we be worried about conflict?”*

Whether you are thinking about your own future needs, or you are caring for someone, be aware that decisions about long-term care can affect family relationships.

Take time in advance to make plans for long-term care and how the family will work together. It is much less stressful to make these plans before an emergency. If important decisions must be made quickly when individuals are emotionally upset, the chances of conflict are much greater. Time constraints may limit the options if plans aren't already in place.

One way to begin this process is to hold a family conference to make sure that all family members are involved in planning for continued care. Ideally such a meeting should be held before a time of crisis occurs. In this way, family members can all have input into the plan before illness or accident places additional stress on relationships. A family conference should give everyone an opportunity to discuss their concerns, identify potential problems and solutions and form a plan for caregiving.

Some suggestions for families in planning such a meeting are:

- Everyone who is concerned and may be affected by the decisions being made should be involved in the meeting.
- If possible, the care receiver should be involved, or have the opportunity to express preferences. If you are thinking about your own long-term care, you can call the meeting yourself.

- If some family members cannot attend due to distance or other reasons, be sure to include them by telephone and keep them informed as time goes on.
- Inform everyone about the purpose of the meeting, make an agenda and then stick to it. Don't get off track on other issues.
- Set rules in advance such as, “no interrupting when others are speaking” or other rules you may feel necessary in your situation.
- Show respect for one another. Remember that you don't have to agree with others but should respect their right to their own opinion.
- It may help to use an unbiased facilitator if conflict is anticipated. This might be clergy, counselor, social worker or other professional.
- List the issues that need to be discussed. Ask family members to voice their concerns in advance if possible. Try to make sure all concerns are addressed.
- Brainstorm possible solutions or ideas about the planning. No idea is bad. Go back and choose the most acceptable solution at the time.
- If one person is already serving as primary caregiver, he/she should list areas where assistance is needed and ask for volunteers to help with these tasks.
- Ask participants to list tasks they are willing to do.
- Prepare a written plan that lists long-term care plans and tasks that family members have agreed to do.
- Continue to hold family conferences to evaluate and keep communications open.

Involving all family members in developing a plan encourages a shared feeling of ownership for the plan and helps ensure success. Working together as a family to plan ahead before a time of crisis can help reduce conflict and stress.