

Conflict Over Caregiving Is Common But families can take steps to minimize disputes

If caring for an older person is causing conflict within your family, you are not alone. Conflict is often part of family caregiving situations. Even the best of intentions to help mom or dad may cause tension. Because everyone approaches things differently, each family member's opinion about what is best for mom or dad can vary greatly. But there are steps you can take to keep family conflict at bay when dealing with caregiving concerns.

Why the conflict? Different attitudes toward family caregiving, depending on personality or family situation, can lead to conflict and alienation between siblings and other relatives. Sometimes the family member with the strongest personality dominates the decision-making process or takes on caregiving responsibilities without consulting other family members. Some family members might deny there is a need and be unwilling to offer assistance. There are also situations where people who have their own children to care for expect an unmarried or childless sibling (or other relative) to take on caregiving responsibilities. The unmarried family member may not welcome this expectation.

Minimizing conflict. Family caregivers need to recognize that conflict is not unusual and getting help is important. If differences continue, family relationships can be permanently damaged. Also, the person being cared for may feel guilt, believing he or she is the cause of conflict. The best way to approach family conflict is to get everyone concerned about the care of the person into the same room to discuss their feelings, create a care plan and assign responsibilities. Face-to-face discussion eliminates the potential for misunderstandings due to information being received second-hand. If conflict continues, the next best step is to get everyone in the same room but with a non-family member in the discussion. The person should be someone whose opinion everyone agrees to respect.

Other steps to take. Sometimes these suggestions just don't seem to work. Don't lose heart. Resolving conflict among families takes time. Be patient and keep doing your best at open, honest communication. Attending a support group by yourself or with family members can also be helpful. Other members may share ideas that worked in similar situations, and you will have the reassurance that you are not alone in your struggles! Lastly, seeking professional counseling as an individual or with family members can greatly improve the situation. If you are dealing with conflict over family caregiving issues you may contact the ADRC for resources and tips on how to handle conflict.

*Jane Mahoney
Older Americans Act Consultant
Greater Wisconsin Agency on Aging Resources*