



How to Manage Challenging Family Dynamics When Making Long-Term Care Decisions

A guide to getting everyone on the same page

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Introduction

Discussions around aging and long-term care can be emotional. When you add childhood roles and rivalries, resistant parents, disagreements over practical issues, and the burden of care, it is no wonder that caring for an aging loved one can be one of the most challenging family milestones. The good news is it does not have to be.

Avoiding Family Blowups

“The elder is already going through a transition,” says Kathleen Williams, Executive Director of [Highgate at Temecula](https://www.highgateseniorliving.com/communities/temecula).¹ “That’s stressful on its own. If the children aren’t seeing eye to eye, the parent is going to feel that stress, too. That’s the last thing they need to be worrying about. [This should be a good time for them.](https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/3-ways-to-help-an-aging-parent-live-their-best-life-in-old-age)”²

1 <https://www.highgateseniorliving.com/communities/temecula>

2 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/3-ways-to-help-an-aging-parent-live-their-best-life-in-old-age>

It is important to focus on what really matters and make some important decisions for your family's future.

Talking About It

When managed well, the experience of caring for an aging loved one has the potential to bring your family closer as you help the elder through this final stage of life. The key is to talk about it early so you know what everyone's expectations are and you are able to plan ahead.

"The more you talk about these things in advance, when a major life event that might require long-term care comes, you've already had those conversations, so it's a lot easier," says Robyn Grant, director of public policy and advocacy at [National Consumer Voice for Long-Term Care](https://theconsumervoice.org/),³ which advocates for quality care and services in any long-term care setting.

Working Better Together

No matter how complex your family dynamics may be, it is possible to establish consensus and get everyone on the same page. In this guide, you will learn about:

- Common causes of family tensions and disagreement
- Why family meetings are important and how to hold one peacefully
- Ways to work better with your siblings
- Professionals who can help when your family hits trouble spots

³ <https://theconsumervoice.org/>



Chapter 1: Common Causes of Family Tensions and Disagreements

Caring for aging parents is complicated. When your siblings are involved, caregiving can become even more complex.

“If you get two siblings, you’re going to have conflict,” says Shelley Phoenix, a Sales Specialist for Highgate Senior Living.

It is usually not because your brother does not care or your sister thinks you should be able to handle caregiving on your own. Typically, family tension erupts because your family has not had to deal before with the practical, emotional, and financial issues that come with caregiving. Without realizing it, past conflicts, clashing personalities, tough decisions, and unequal contributions can cause more conflict than they normally would.

To avoid family blowouts, it is helpful to recognize common disagreements so you can keep the focus where it belongs — on your family member’s care.

Here is a look at five common causes of family tensions and disagreements.

1. Differing Ideas About What a Parent Needs

One of the most common issues among families is when siblings do not see their [parent's care needs](#)⁴ the same way.

“I’ve seen situations where there’s a daughter who lives in town with Mom and tries to help her out with things,” Grant says. “She sees the level of assistance that Mom needs. The brother lives out of state and comes in once a year, so Mom rallies because she wants to put up a good front — and she’s delighted to see him — so he sees something different than the sibling who is there on a day-to-day basis.”

2. Unequal Caregiving Responsibilities

Families do not often discuss caregiving roles and responsibilities. What usually happens is the child who lives closest to Mom will help out with small things. Then, before anyone really notices, that person has assumed the role of the primary caregiver.

This can lead to a lot of conflict. Perhaps the primary caregiver assumes they do not need to ask for help, and maybe other family members do not offer.

“A lot of times when there are siblings involved, one says, ‘Mom can stay at home,’ and the other says, ‘No, something has to change because I’m the one doing all the work,’” Williams says.

Ultimately, the main caregiver is left feeling resentful.

3. Caregiver Guilt

Guilt is an ever-present emotion for many family caregivers for a variety of

⁴ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/infographic-what-level-of-care-should-you-be-researching>

reasons. “Families don’t want to be the one to actually say, ‘Mom, you have to move,’” Williams says. “It’s hard to step into that role. It is guilt-ridden.”

LaTresh Walker, Healthcare Director at Highgate at Temecula adds: “It’s never easy to place a loved one in a long-term care facility. There is a lot of guilt. You question yourself — Am I doing the right thing? Should I have taken them home with me? — even though in the long term, [it is the best for your loved one](#).”⁵

Phoenix says she sometimes hears long-distance siblings criticizing the care the in-town sibling is providing — Why aren’t you doing this? Don’t do it like that. — even when they do not have a real concern. “[It’s usually guilt](#),”⁶ she says.

4. Figuring Out Financials

For many families, figuring out [how to pay for a family member’s care](#)⁷ can be challenging, especially if the parents do not have the funds to pay themselves.

“Sometimes the one who is doing the work isn’t the one handling the money,” Williams says, which can cause conflict when making decisions about where the parent should live or whether they can afford a housekeeper.

In Phoenix’s experiences, family conflicts are rarely just about money, though: “You try to figure out what’s truly important to that family. Nine times out of 10, they’re going to say cost. But



5 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/stop-feeling-guilty-about-your-parents-moving-to-assisted-living>

6 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/how-to-manage-long-distance-caregiver-guilt>

7 <https://info.highgateseniorliving.com/guide-how-to-pay-for-assisted-living-costs>

when you dig down deeper, it's never about that. Money is a crutch. Usually, it's about something going on with them, and usually, that's guilt: 'I can't be here, so I'm going to blame you.' 'I'm overwhelmed, so I'm going to blame you.'"

5. Resistant Parents

Sometimes, sibling tension is actually exacerbated by the parent. "You need to get to a point where your siblings agree on what services and assistance are needed, but you also need to work with your parents and where they are," Grant says.

Maybe Dad is telling each child a different version of the story about his week, which can cause conflict and confusion among siblings. A [parent who resists care](#)⁸ can also be divisive.

"When Mom is adamant she's going to die at home and one sibling supports her and the other says she needs to go to an assisted living community or nursing home, it can be very stressful," Grant says.

To prevent these types of conflicts, Walker recommends returning to the question: What is best for Mom or Dad?

"It's so important for the family to be on the same page," she says.

"Otherwise, the elder doesn't get the care they need. It's not about the siblings. Put your differences aside. Stop and look and see what's best for Mom or Dad."

The best way to do that? A family meeting.

⁸ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/what-to-do-when-your-aging-parent-doesnt-want-your-help>



Chapter 2: Why Hold a Family Meeting & How to Do It Peacefully

Caring for an aging loved one is a group effort — or at least it should be.

It is easy for families to fall into common traps, assuming, for example, that one sibling will become Dad's caregiver because she has a background in health care or lives nearby. Not discussing caregiving needs and responsibilities is a common cause of family conflict.

The best way to work cooperatively as a family is to hold regular family meetings. Here's how:

Initiate Meetings Sooner Rather Than Later

As soon as your parent begins to have health problems or struggle with [activities of daily living](#),⁹ initiate regular family meetings with your parent,

⁹ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/slideshow-what-are-activities-of-daily-living-anyway>

siblings, and any other members of the caregiving team, which may include a family friend, neighbor, or paid caregiver. If someone lives out of town, Skype them in.

“Planning ahead makes such a huge difference,” Grant says. “Even if you’re in a situation where your mother is doing great, have conversations now about what to do when things start to get a little harder.”

Include Your Loved One

The goal of the family meeting is to get everyone on the same team in support of the elder, regarding their care and quality of life — so involve your loved one as much as possible in the meeting. “Keeping the focus on the elder really helps,” Grant says.

Create an Agenda

No one wants to sit in a meeting where participants are unprepared, people veer off-track, and the topics discussed are a waste of the team’s time. An effective agenda sets clear expectations for what needs to occur before and during a meeting.

Whether there are specific problems to solve, information to share, or thoughts to air, work with all family members ahead of time to [create an agenda for the meeting](#).¹⁰ An agenda might include discussions about:

- The parent’s wants and needs
- Who will make decisions
- What each person can contribute
- What support the primary caregiver needs
- Tasks that need to be done

¹⁰ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/slideshow-a-step-by-step-guide-to-having-a-successful-family-meeting>

Watch Your Language

Encourage everyone to use I-statements and to say “I need” instead of “You should.”

“Thinking through what you’re going to say beforehand is helpful,” Grant says. “Describe things objectively, without loaded emotion behind the words. Send the message you want to send.”

Do not be afraid to use your words. “I always tell people, ‘Tell me more about that,’” Phoenix says. “Everybody has a valid point. Use more words. Tell me more about that. It’s all about communication and saying what you truly mean.”

Recognize Strengths

When dividing caregiving tasks, roles, and responsibilities, take into account each family member’s interests and skills as well as their availability. Maybe your sister does not have time to go to doctor appointments with your dad during the day, but she can pay his bills online at night. Perhaps your brother, who lives out of state, can visit every few months to give you a break.

“We all have different strengths,” Grant says. “Try to recognize that and allow people to contribute in different ways.”

Get Specific

Start by asking your parent what assistance they would like or what would help them have a good day. It can help to ask questions to understand their basic wishes: “Here are the things you do now. What are things that are really important to you?”

“The earlier you have the discussion, the more options you have and the smoother things go,” Grant says. “Get specific. Not, ‘Oh, we’ll get Mom some help.’ What specifically does she need? Identify the things that need to be

done, who is going to do it, and how often.”

At the end of the meeting, make sure everyone has a clear understanding of the issues and considerations discussed and document any decisions and agreements that were made during the meeting.

Schedule a Follow-up

Family meetings need to take place regularly. Set a date for the next meeting. It could be in a week or a year, but setting a time to reconvene is useful. Use email, phone, or whatever is convenient for your group to stay connected in the meantime.





Chapter 3: Ways to Work Better Together with Siblings

When caring for an aging parent, your siblings can be a source of support — and a source of stress.

By taking steps to foster positive communication and support one another as much as possible, the challenging role of providing care for elderly parents can be a fulfilling, rewarding experience, which ultimately can bring siblings closer together.

Here are five ways you can work better together with your siblings:

1. Meet Them Where They Are

Oftentimes, your siblings' intentions are good, but their time, resources, and skills are limited. Try to accept your siblings as they really are, not who you wish they were. Keep your own expectations and expressions of “should” in check. Instead, strive to accept and work with your siblings' personalities and abilities.

2. Be Compassionate

This is a hard time for everyone. Sometimes fear, pain, or guilt might cause you and your siblings to [act out of emotional needs](https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/are-you-acting-out-of-emotional-need-or-fighting-old-battles).¹¹ You do not have to excuse negative behavior, but try to be compassionate.

3. Be Concrete and Specific

If you feel you are carrying too much of the burden, it is possible that your siblings do not even know. Explain how you feel in a matter-of-fact, non-confrontational way. “One thing you could do is take notes about the level of assistance you’re providing so your siblings who aren’t in town can get a sense of the scope of the job,” Grant suggests.

4. Divide Tasks Fairly

There are not many families where the caregiving responsibilities are spread equally among the siblings, but they can be divided fairly. “Have the out-of-town siblings come visit sometime outside the holiday time period,” Grant says. “Then they can take some steps in the in-town sibling’s shoes to see what she or he is experiencing and what it’s like.”

5. Get Help from the Pros

If you hit trouble spots, reach out to a mediator, social worker, or geriatric care manager. “When tensions are high, it’s best to have a neutral party that can say, ‘You’re out of line’ or ‘That isn’t what she’s saying,’” Walker says.

¹¹ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/are-you-acting-out-of-emotional-need-or-fighting-old-battles>



Chapter 4: Professionals Who Can Help When Your Family Hits Trouble Spots

Family caregivers are often asked to step into roles they have no training for, and the tasks at hand are made more complex by complicated emotions and family dynamics. What family would not benefit from a professional?

“Having a neutral third party come in who is trained and doesn’t have that emotional attachment can be enormously helpful,” Grant says.

Here’s a look at five professionals to turn to when things get tough:

1. Health Care Provider

If you are convinced that your family member is no longer capable of driving, but your brothers argue that he needs to maintain his independence, consider [getting their health care provider involved](#).¹²

12 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/5-tips-for-communicating-with-your-parents-doctor>



“I can help families get on the same page about what’s best for their loved one,” Walker says. “I can help them navigate that difficult conversation by being direct about what I’m seeing and what I recommend.”

2. Long-Term Care Ombudsman

Long-term care ombudsmen¹³ are advocates for residents of nursing homes, board and care homes, and assisted living facilities.

They are also trained to resolve problems and can provide information about how to find a facility and what to do to get quality care. The ombudsman program is administered by the Administration on Aging/Administration for Community Living.¹⁴

3. Geriatric Care Managers

Geriatric care managers,¹⁵ also known as aging life care professionals, are health and human services specialists who act as guides and advocates for families who are caring for older relatives.

“Professional geriatric care managers can make a huge difference,” Grant says. “They’re trained to be able to assess the elder in their environment and get a sense of what they need and to work with the dynamics in the family and to work with the family as a team to come up with a plan.”

¹³ <https://ltcombudsman.org/>

¹⁴ <https://acl.gov/>

¹⁵ <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/what-geriatric-care-manager>

4. Residential Community

If you are looking for information about long-term care, it can help to go straight to the source. “Reach out to a local community you respect and has a good reputation,” Williams says. “Ask for resources, and they’ll give good info and won’t do a hard sell.”

“For example, we have [resources on the website](#)¹⁶ on how to [talk to Mom about leaving home](#)¹⁷ or [what to do when assisted living is the next step](#),”¹⁸ she continues. “We could refer you to an elder attorney to get everything in place. We could refer them to a downsizer. Even if you aren’t ready to move in and you’re just starting the search, a local community can be an excellent resource.”

5. Elder Mediator

[Elder mediators](#)¹⁹ provide a forum for family decision-making. A highly skilled conflict resolution expert and a neutral facilitator who does not provide advice or take sides, an elder mediator is helpful in family meetings, where they can help you stay focused on the topic at hand and help you avoid bringing up old arguments.

Conclusion

No matter how complex your family dynamics may be, it is possible to establish consensus and get everyone on the same page. These conversations can take days, weeks, or even months. So long as you have a plan in place, your family can have the confidence knowing your loved one will always be taken care of.

16 <https://www.highgateseniorliving.com/resources>

17 <https://info.highgateseniorliving.com/how-to-have-the-talk-with-an-aging-parent>

18 <https://info.highgateseniorliving.com/how-to-research-assisted-living-communities-checklist>

19 <https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/financial-legal/info-2017/how-to-choose-caregiver-mediator.html>



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