

Say it in Writing



Addressing the care and wishes of your aging parents

Many years ago, I worked for a woman whose slogan was “Say it in Writing.” It was the mantra of our office. That was a different time and a different career, but it is even more important when dealing with your aging parents.

Caring for a parent of accumulated years can be very stressful for families. But, the stress goes up logarithmically when members of the family disagree over how and where to care for their aging parent. It’s interesting how families who think that they are close and usually agreeing suddenly begin to squabble over what each perceives to be “best.” I have even seen these squabbles escalate into legal battles for guardianship, which usually creates bitterness and divides a family when they most need to be united. What happens when it is a blended family and each has children who have an opinion? What if both parents in this blended family are still alive and one parent is taking care of his/her ailing spouse? Do the children step in or do they allow the caregiving parent to continue caring for the spouse even if it is detrimental to his/her health? How do you deal with a parent who is adamant about caring for a spouse when you know they need help and won’t accept it?

Here’s a real situation which one of the LivHOME Care Managers has found herself working with. Ralph and Mary are in their 80’s. He’s 85 and has recently had a stroke, which has left him physically impaired, but he has all of his cognitive abilities. His wife of 60 years is 81 going on 50. She is very social, entertains often, plays cards with a group of woman and does not want to be a caregiver. She wants her husband to stay in the skilled nursing where he currently is. Ralph, on the other hand, doesn’t like being there and wants to return home while going through physical therapy. The reality is that he will never regain his mobility and will need assistance with personal hygiene and to get in and out of bed. However, there is also no reason why he needs to be in a skilled nursing since his care can be provided in his home.

Mary has stated unequivocally that Ralph cannot come home and “ruin her life.” Their four children have taken sides. Two of the children agree that Mary should not take on the stress of their father’s care and give up her social life, while the other two believe their father has the right to live in his own home if that’s what he wants and that mom is being unreasonable. Legally, if Ralph and Mary own the home jointly, she cannot keep him from coming home. However, can you think of anything more stressful to a family than to be divided on parental care?

Think of the stress that Mary will be under having to care for her husband when clearly she doesn’t want to be a caregiver. And, if he comes home, who will do his daily care if his wife is resistant? Will he perceive her fear of caregiving as rejection and how will that impact his recuperation? How do the kids resolve their differences?

There are ways that this can be avoided. First, while your par-

ents are well and able, discuss their choices and possible options should something happen that compromises their ability to care for themselves independently. And, then “Say it in Writing” with each possible scenario.

- Where does mom want to live?
- Does she want to stay in her own home?
- If she does stay home and needs assistance who will provide the assistance?
- How would those duties be divided?
- Would the home be “senior friendly” if she were to have physical issues?
- Can the home be altered to meet her needs?
- If her home isn’t safe or it isn’t appropriate, would an assisted living community be an option or will she be better off living with one of you?
- Has she visited some assisted living communities and does she have a choice?
- If the senior is married, who is designated to make decisions?
- How will the family handle caregiver burnout?
- Would you want to separate your parents or keep them together?
- What if the spouse can’t or won’t care for your other parent?
- Will any of the siblings contribute financially to a parent’s care?
- If a skilled nursing home is needed, who will choose which one?
- What will the financial impact be if this is a subsequent marriage and each spouse has children from a previous marriage and the parents have merged funds since they have been married?

To avoid disagreements, create a “sibling agreement” that addresses these issues and has consequences if not followed. Sibling agreements do not replace trusts or powers of attorney. A sibling agreement is a tool which helps provide guidance for the trustee or the holder of the power of attorney.

A LivHOME Care Manager can serve as a mediator. First, a Care Manager will assess what each perceives as stressful, challenging and/or threatening. Then he or she will look at the values, commitments, goals and beliefs of each of the parties especially those of the senior. The Care Manager will then look at the financial situation, social supports and potential available resources before developing a care plan, helping to design a sibling agreement (if necessary) and bringing in community resources to mitigate the stress levels of both the client and the family.

We know how important “saying it in writing” is when we create important documents. Doesn’t it make sense to develop a future care plan? You wouldn’t leave your children’s care to chance, why would you leave your parents’? **HB**

For more information, call LivHome at (949) 794-9470.