

Taking the conflict out of the care

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‘TO BE honest, life is too short to be having a conflict.’



As a mediator, Frances Stephenson is familiar with that most difficult of potential conflicts: how to agree, within the family, on what should be done to meet the needs of an aged parent who is no longer independent or whose independence is severely curtailed by ill health or frailty.

She and four colleagues have set up Later Life Mediation, a private mediation service, to work in this difficult area. They have mediated between parents and (adult) children, children and children, and family members and nursing home staff.

The potential sources of conflict are legion: how should the parent's needs be met and who should meet them? How can the separate families of a previously divorced or widowed parent co-operate?

How can adult children living abroad be brought into the picture? How can issues with nursing homes be resolved?

And what of the parent's own need to have his or her autonomy respected? “It's very hard for an adult living independently whose children think they know better,” says fellow mediator Joe McDermott. “That can cause a lot of conflict.”

Nobody likes to admit their family is in conflict or that they need help from outside. But, says McDermott, families realise that mediation is a private process whereas “if you go for a litigation everything is exposed”.

Mediation helps with highly emotional sources of conflict. For instance, a son or daughter living abroad may be critical of the care being provided by the family in Ireland because “when they come home they don't see how much is involved”, Stephenson says.

When brought into the process through phone conversations with a mediator, the absent family members gain an appreciation of how serious the parent's needs are and will often get involved in working out how to handle the situation.

To McDermott, the most rewarding aspect of mediation is that it gets people talking who, in some cases, may have been at odds for years. “One woman talked about bringing peace and harmony and helping people to come together again.”

Parents, they find, “are more than happy for someone to come in”, seeing the mediator as a guide through a complex situation.

Not all parents can be involved, though. “It depends on their capacity if they can be part of the mediation,” Stephenson says. “If someone has advanced dementia, it can be very difficult for them to be there.”

But the parent’s presence can be felt in other ways. “If parents can’t be there, we sometimes put in an empty chair. That can be very powerful. People sometimes bring a picture. We make sure the voices are heard.”

Mediation, she finds, has helped in the most demanding situations. For instance, a father may have two families and, now that he is ill, one family may feel out in the cold.

“By getting the second family into the process, it’s amazing the difference that makes.”

When two families who have been “all battling along and deciding for themselves” realise that their common concern is what’s right for their parent, relationships can improve rapidly.

Even more difficult for all concerned, perhaps, is the issue of what will happen to a dependent adult child with a disability when his or her remaining parent passes away. If there are other siblings, they may not have faced up to the issue. “Sometimes people put off making decisions. They may not even know what options there are.”

Mediation can help families in this difficult and painful situation to find out about and consider options before a crisis strikes.

The mediators have also found themselves called in to resolve conflicts between families and nursing homes. Sometimes families are reluctant to complain because they fear their relative will be vulnerable. “But if there is a complaint against a staff member, that person may feel vulnerable as well.”

Bringing family and staff together helps explain misunderstandings and improve relationships, they find.

Later Life Mediation has three female and two male mediators. The other mediators are Claire Kearney, whose background is psychotherapy, Helen Harnett, a certified conflict coach, and Brian O’Neill, a qualified mediator. Stephenson also mediates in workplace settings and McDermott is a former prison governor.

Even with that diverse set of skills available, mediation does not always resolve the conflict. Yet, McDermott argues, in situations of apparent failure, “if they come together, it opens up communications. You would find that good eventually came out of it”.

Usually the mediators talk to each interested party individually before bringing the family together, often on neutral ground.

The improved co-operation between family members which ideally results – “It has been seen to stimulate involvement from people who had never been involved,” says McDermott – often means that a parent who wishes to live at home gets to do so for longer.

Later Life Mediation is at laterlife mediation.com

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