

Dealing with changing needs of an aged parent

Later life mediators can help with the thorny issue of parental care



Later Life Mediation members, from left, Brian O'Neill, Claire Kearney, Joe McDermott, Helen Harnett and Frances Stephenson outside their office on Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin. Photograph: Cyril Byrne

[Sylvia Thompson](#)

Working out the best living arrangements for an ageing parent can be one of the trickiest and most emotionally draining experiences for middle-aged adults.

A lot of families find it difficult to have conversations about the changing needs of their ageing mother or father. And sometimes, one family member dominates discussions while others have difficulty having their voices heard. In some situations, the ageing parent feels he/she doesn't have any say in the matter.

It is in situations like these that elder mediators can help, and a group of five counsellors/therapists based in Dublin say there is more and more demand for the service

they offer.

Changing needs

Elder mediation or later life mediation can help families at various stages of decision-making around the changing needs of an ageing parent.

By being an independent voice, they can help families cope with a diagnosis of dementia and deal with financial issues, caring rotas or home-help arrangements while always keeping the ageing parent as their central focus.

“We deal with all types of situations from siblings falling out over how they feel their parent should be looked after to an ageing parent cut off from the rest of the family who want to make contact again,” explains [Frances Stephenson](#) from [Later Life Mediation](#).

Adult children returning to the family home, individuals in their 70s looking after someone in their 90s or an older person in a nursing home not having their care needs met are other issues that arise.

The mediators first meet with each family member individually and confidentially, and then arrange a family meeting to discuss the issues.

“We help people through their options and have the older person present if possible in his/her own home or in a neutral place. We don’t share the information we get from the individual meetings but we are informed by it,” says Stephenson.

‘Anticipatory grief’

“We talk about such things as anticipatory grief which is the emotion you feel when you can see a decline in your parent. That can have a huge impact on people.

“Sometimes, one sibling feels he/she knows the best way to treat the ageing parent and others can be pushed out or can be further away geographically,” says [Claire Kearney](#) from Later Life Mediation.

“We try to find a role for each person so that they feel involved and we have Skyped family members who are abroad so that they can partake in the family meetings. That has worked really well,” she adds.

Coping with different family members’ interpretations regarding how well/unwell their parent is can be very difficult.

“Sometimes, an ageing parent can have a burst of adrenaline when one of their adult children comes home from abroad and another sibling can seem to be exaggerating their symptoms,” says Stephenson.

Other times, issues arise between the siblings.

“If we pick up on tension, we offer these individuals opportunities to deal with these issues with another counsellor. It’s important that the focus remains on the older person,” says Kearney.

The counsellors and therapists are also very aware of elder abuse and point out to anyone who uses their services that if elder abuse is suspected, it will be reported to the HSE.

“Elder abuse is a big problem and when mediation takes place, there are more eyes on the situation, which can minimise it happening.

“People are under so much pressure that it can impact on how they speak to and treat their ageing parent.

“We will always do an awareness-building exercise about how to talk to and look after an ageing parent and how would it feel if you were the ageing parent. And everyone signs an agreement at the start which states that everything, except elder abuse, is confidential,” says Stephenson.

“We will also reality-test the care plan that is in place to see if it meets the needs of the older person.

“If the older person can’t be at the group meeting, we might have a friend/cousin or sister along to represent him/her.

“At times, we’ll even pull in an empty chair to represent the absent parent.”

Kearney says that they have had huge positive feedback from people who use their services.

Canadian research has found that older people are more likely to stay in their homes longer when those around them stay on board, hear their wishes and find solutions within the community to relieve the burden.

“It becomes a very intimate space and it is amazing work when you see people drawing the line in the sand and moving on from issues to value the time they have with the older person. By helping people get through difficult times/relationships, it can free up energy for what needs to be done,” says Kearney

“I’ve never heard anyone say that it was a waste of time.”

The service costs about €500 per family which includes all the individual and family meetings.

Day-long workshops

Later Life Mediation also offers day-long Ageing in Families workshops which include

issues such as handling communications with siblings and parents effectively; understanding the emotional journey and keeping potential harmful emotional responses at bay; and planning the next steps towards making key decisions in your family.

“In terms of giving families tips on what to do, we say planning ahead is the key. We encourage the older person to think about what he/she wants to do and communicate this with all the family together so no one hears things differently,” says Kearney.

An Ageing in Families Workshop, run by Helen Harnett and Brian O’Neill, will be held on Saturday, September 21st, from 10am-4pm, in the Milltown Parish Pastoral Centre, Dublin 6. Cost €50 per person. Bookings on tel: 0873902547.