Family Dynamics: Why Can’t We Agree?

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Who is Tamara?

Tamara Statz, MA, LMFT

• University of Minnesota
  - Residential Care Transition Module (RCTM) research
  - Flyer on the back table!
• Vibrant Living Senior Services, LLC
  - Private practice
  - In-home mental health therapy for seniors and their families / caregivers
Why are we here?

Let's differentiate…

• FAMILY DYNAMICS
  - Brother who lives in Washington and never calls
  - Dad avoids conflict

• FAMILY CONFLICT
  - Usually over email
  - Sister hangs up when she gets mad

• AREAS OF CONFLICT
  - Mom's care plan
  - How often brother goes to visit (or doesn't visit, for that matter)

Grief and Loss
Grief and Loss

- Family dynamics, history, and expectations regarding grief, loss, mourning, etc.
- Everyone grieves differently
- Different levels of everyone’s grief causes different responses
  - Try to keep this in mind as everyone may be needing something different
  - This is even more complicated with past traumas in the family – abuse, unresolved conflict, etc.

Grief and Loss

- Grief MYTHS:
  - Linear
  - Clear START and FINISH
  - Limited to expressions sadness and anger
  - You can only grieve a death
  - Someone with a similar experience will understand and be supportive
  - You cannot grieve someone who is still alive
Grief and Loss

• Grief TRUTHS:
  - Can be many emotions all at once
  - Ebbs and flows like waves
  - Can stay with us indefinitely
  - Is completely individual to each person
    • Not everyone needs to talk*
      - Some individuals need to turn inward to process
    • Not everyone needs to cry*
      - Some individuals need to express emotions in other ways such as exercise, creativity, writing
      - *or at least not as much as we might think
  - You can grieve someone who is still alive
    • Ambiguous Loss – Pauline Boss (1999)

• The Extended Grief Cycle
  - Shock*: Initial paralysis at hearing the bad news
  - Denial: Trying to avoid the inevitable
  - Anger: Frustrated outpouring of bottled-up emotion
  - Bargaining: Seeking in vain for a way out
  - Depression: Final realization of the inevitable
  - Testing*: Seeking realistic solutions
  - Acceptance: Finally finding the way forward
The Two-Track Model of Bereavement

BALL OF GRIEF
A Tangled 'BALL' OF EMOTIONS

What would you add?
Grief

STAGES OF GRIEF

My experience

Family Meetings
Family Meetings

Can you have these effectively on your own?

- If not, would you consider hiring someone to help?
  - Wilder Caregiver Services
  - Social Worker at the facility
- It can be helpful to have a neutral professional in the room to facilitate the discussion and stay on topic
- Handout on back table: *Holding a Family Meeting*

VALUES

- What does each member of your family have in common?
  - Everyone wants Mom to be comfortable and have a good life, and be happy
  - So, what are the steps that can be taken to make that happen?
- If you approach problem-solving from a place of mutual values, that can re-orient the conversation from conflict to cooperation
Family Meetings

• It’s OK to take a time-out!
  - If things are getting “heated” and the conversation is no longer productive…
    • Take a time-out, AND…
      - Schedule a time to return to the conversation
      - Within 24 hours
  - Meet in a neutral location
    - Conference room at the facility
    - Library study room
    - Coffee shop meeting room

Family Meetings

• How to talk directly to the person, and not create “triangles”
  - Triangulation
    • Using another person as a substitute or messenger for communication
    • Usually to express dissatisfaction with the main person
    • Example:
      - Brother and Sister are having conflict over how much money is being spent on Mom’s birthday party
        • Brother talks to Father about what he thinks and how Sister is wrong
        • Father talks to Sister about how Brother is feeling
Triangulation

Triangulation occurs when person A has a boundary that person B does not want to respect. To get around the boundary, person B establishes a relationship with a third person C who is close to person A and uses that person to get “inside” with person A by proxy, hence violating the boundary.

Family Meetings

- How to talk directly to the person, and not create “triangles”
  - Ask yourself:
    - WHAT is the problem
    - WHO is involved
    - WHERE and WHEN can everyone be together to talk
  - Avoid “venting” to other interested parties
    - Can form alliances that are not helpful
    - Creates more problems than solutions

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Family Meetings

• Remember:
  - We are only responsible and in control of **ourselves**
  - Family dynamics bring out the BEST and WORST in others, which might be cause for surprise
    • In good and bad ways..
  - This does not have to be permanent
    • But it can be, if you are not intentional
    • Be open to forgiving others

• Caregiving can be a time of high stress and burnout
  • We do not all operate at our top capacity in this situation
    • Cut yourself and others some “slack”
    • Give yourself and others room to be imperfect

  • **DO YOUR BEST**
    • This might inspire others to do their best, as well
Power of Attorney (POA)

- Can be a tricky decision to assign this role
  - How to decide who should fill this role?
    - Oldest child? Closest geographically? Current or past career in a medical field? Only child?
    - Does one child cover Medical POA and another Financial POA?
  - And then the person in the role is responsible for meaningful and often painful decision-making
    - The intensity of which might not be acknowledged by other family members
Power of Attorney (POA)

• Is that the source of conflict?
  - Is the POA/decision-maker angry with the rest of the family? Feeling “dumped on?”
  - Is s/he not open to having others help or not asking for help, and yet feels resentful?

• How can everyone chip in besides POA duties?
  - Shovel the walk, mow the lawn
  - Paint the house and garage
  - Grocery shop and make meals
  - Buy clothes
  - Etc.

Power of Attorney (POA)

• Work with each other’s strengths
  - Example:
    • Brother goes to the library to get books for mom
    • Other brother attends appointments with her
    • Both are filling roles that play into their strengths

• Expand your idea of what “participating” means
  - Lengthy visits are not the only way
  - Besides, comparing lengths of visits is a black hole..
Power of Attorney (POA)

- Do not be surprised if there are conflicting ideas about what types of care should be provided and for how long
  - Access quality information from the healthcare provider or Advance Directive Facilitator in order to make educated decisions
    - Or to help family members understand WHY decisions have been made as they have
- Remember
  - The role of POA can be stressful, intense, important, and meaningful all at once
    - Can you have empathy for what your sibling is going through?
Communication

• How often does your family touch-base?
  - How often is “necessary” might be hard to agree on
  - However, clear and consistent, frequent
    communication can alleviate “unknowns” that can get
    blown out of proportion
• Checking in with each other:
  - “Are you okay?”
  - “This seems to be a difficult topic.”
  - “Is there something you would like to share?”
Communication

- Avoid triangulation (previously mentioned)
  - Communicate directly with the person at hand
- Focus on the current issue
  - Not reliving/retelling past hurts
- What is the desired outcome of the conversation

Communication

- Is there a time to sit and just discuss how everyone is feeling?
  - Letting everyone know that it is ok to disagree
  - Important to respect everyone’s feelings.
  - Relationships can be very different
    - Especially due to past hurts among the family members
    - Some may not even be aware of past hurts
Communication

- Other systems can help:
  - Google Calendar
    - Share a calendar as a family
      - Everyone can see and edit as needed
    - https://calendar.google.com
  - Slack
    - Designed for team work
    - Group messaging and to-do list management
    - https://slack.com

Family Disputes and Disagreements
Family Disputes and Disagreements

- Remember, each member has a history in the family
  - Dynamics play out here
- Birth order
  - Older siblings “know more”
  - Youngest was “spoiled” and should contribute more now because of it
- Again, it’s OK to take a time-out!
  - If things are getting “heated” and the conversation is no longer productive…
    - Take a time-out, AND…
      - Schedule a time to return to the conversation
      - Within 24 hours

Family Disputes and Disagreements

- How to diffuse family disputes effectively
  - Part 1: Encourage the right mentality
    1. Think about everyone’s perspective
    2. Reflect on how the conflict affects other family members
    3. Ask other family members how they are feeling
    4. Look for the underlying issue

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Family Disputes and Disagreements

- **How to diffuse family disputes effectively**
  - *Part 2: Have a healthy discussion*
    1. Establish ground rules for a healthy discussion
    2. Encourage everyone to discuss their emotions
    3. Paraphrase people’s thoughts
    4. Make sure everyone has a chance to express themselves

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Family Disputes and Disagreements

- **How to diffuse family disputes effectively**
  - *Part 3: Find a way to move forward*
    1. Work on healing the relationships
    2. Strive for forgiveness
    3. Keep your expectations realistic

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Family Disputes and Disagreements

• Four Steps of Conflict Resolution
  1. Separate person from the problem
  2. Focus on outcome not position
  3. Utilize brainstorming method for solution generation
  4. Choose solution and choose time period and method of measurement

Family Disputes and Disagreements

• Return to values
  - What do we know is important to Mom?
    • After all, this is about her care
    • Not the petty disagreements or past hurts we have
  - Can recenter the conversation and bring focus
    • COMMON GOAL
    • Mom’s comfort, quality of life, happiness, etc.
Family Disputes and Disagreements

- What do to when family members do not agree
  - Is it possible to agree to disagree?
    - Is this something that absolutely requires that every member be “on-board”?
      - Probably not…
  - Think about how this affects the person with dementia
    - Afterall, this whole caregiving experience is about them, providing them quality care and the best decisions at the time, with the information that you have
    - For their benefit, reduce conflict

Family Involvement (or lackthereof)
Family Involvement

• Family members who are not involved/available but who want to guilt others
  - Keeping Mom at home rather than a facility, but not being available to provide help
• Is a family member afraid of the terminal diagnosis or thought of death?
  - Staying away because they personally have not dealt with their mortality
  - Thought of another person dying is overwhelming

Family Involvement

• How to handle the “out of town” sibling
  - Swoops in at the last minute, “No, Mom wants CPR!”
  - Often s/he experiences guilt over being unavailable
    • Might not be able to say so, however
  - Comes back to communication
    • Consistent, inclusive communication via email or calendar, conference-calls
    • You might not get a response, but you know you sent it, you did your part
Family Involvement

• Keep your side of the street clean
  - Do your part
  - Do your best, whatever that is at the time
• Trust that others are doing their best
  - Comparison is a **trap**
  - Their “best” might not look like yours

Family Involvement

• At the end of the day, are you satisfied with your involvement? Can you say, “I did my best.”?
• Whether other not other family members are going to feel regret later over lack of involvement, that is for them to experience and decide
Families and Finances

• The two toughest things to talk about..
  - Sex and money
• Why this can get tricky..
  - Inheritance
  - How well money is being managed
  - How much care costs
  - Different views of money / spending among siblings
  - Deciding on which care, how much care, which facility

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Families and Finances

• Communication
  - How to explain to siblings why Dad needs to spend some of his savings for added help at home
  - Do you schedule regular, quarterly family meetings to address all topics, including finances?

Families and Finances

• Decisions
  - That the person with memory loss is the priority
    • Then there can be discussions about money that remains
  - Another area to agree to disagree
    • Is consensus really necessary?

• Financial POA
  - Who did Mom or Dad entrust with this task?
    • There is probably a reason why s/he was chosen
Crisis Events

- As much as you can, make decisions during a point of calm
  - If you are thinking of increasing care to a different level, look into that now, not after Mom has a stroke
  - When emotions are running high, things are apt to go awry
    - When you are calm, you can be *logical*
- Avoid *legal* decisions during crises
Crisis Events

- Crises bring in elements of fear and pain over current circumstances
- They can be opportunities to make changes in care that have been needed for some time
  - After it becomes quite apparent that a change is needed
  - But this is not a good reason to wait to make changes

Trust
Trust

• We could take about this topic alone for 2 hours.
• Caregiving and decision-making can bring out the **best** and **worst** in family members
• Caregiving can build **character** in individuals

Trust

• How to rebuild trust in a family after it has been broken, in this context
  - Remember what you know of this person, whom you have known for 40 years
    • People change, but not *that* fast
    • Was s/he trustworthy before?
    • Do you believe that s/he can be trustworthy again?
  - Remember, no situation *has* to be **permanent**
    • Things are constantly changing and evolving
Trust

• How to rebuild trust
  - Take some time apart to cool-off
  - Utilize conflict resolution skills
  - Focus on the outcome you want
  - Do not dredge up the past
  - Forgive as you can (it is good for you, too)
  - Time can help
• Family therapy

Legal Issues
Legal Issues

- These can be very hard and loaded with emotion and meaning
  - Can drive a wedge between family members
- As much as possible, work things out while Mom and Dad can make their own decisions and get them into legal documentation
- Take time to think things through and discuss
  - Use a mediator or elder law attorney as needed

To end on a good note..
Good Notes

- Not all families experience conflict – there are always exceptions to the rule!
  - I saw this in my own family – 12 siblings!
- Caregiving can be an intense time of individual and family growth
  - It can stabilize or solidify familial bonds
- This does not have to be a time of intense conflict

Community Resources

- Wilder Caregiving Services
  - 651-280-CARE (2273) email caregiving@wilder.org
- Minnesota Board on Aging
  - http://www.mnaging.net/Advisor/Caregiver.aspx
  - Handout on back table: Holding A Family Meeting
- Minnesota Association of Area Agencies on Aging
  - http://www.mn4a.org/
- FamilyMeans Caregiver Support Program
  - https://www.familymeans.org/help-for-caregivers.html
- Volunteers of America (VOA)
  - https://www.voamnwi.org/community-services-for-seniors
Thank You!

• Questions?
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