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# Today's Business: What happens when a parent ages and the family would like to step in?

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Photo: Contributed Photo

Linda L. Elovson, left, and Christine M. Tenore

Mom, always independent and now in her mid-80s, widowed and with multiple health problems, is suddenly not handling her basic care ... or her “every day decisions” are far from her usual reasonable self.

What can a family do?

Self-sufficient care is described as Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) — the basic functions of life such as bathing, dressing, feeding and medicating. Independent Activities of Daily Living (IADLs) are often called the “business of life,” which is basic maintenance of the home, making sure repairs are made, paying bills, making doctor appointments and so forth.

In many older couples, often only one of the spouses handles household finances. If that spouse becomes ill or passes away, the other spouse typically is a bit lost. Suddenly, we have, for example, a wife who is widowed, alone and with children who may or may not live nearby. When the children visit they notice and are concerned that Mom’s business affairs and/or personal care is not up to par.

As so often happens, multiple children may have differing approaches, making it difficult to find a solution. It is most important from an elder law perspective to remember that “Mom is the client” and her wishes are paramount. We need to help her to make decisions in her best interest given current circumstances. A Power-of-Attorney appointing a Financial Agent and a Living Will appointing a Health Care Representative do not give an adult child the right and privilege of telling the parent what to do. Rather, they are empowered to carry out Mom’s wishes. So how do we resolve both the quandary, preserve the parent’s dignity and at the same time provide a sense of independence? How do we reconcile different opinions that multiple children propose?

There is no one answer. What may be needed is an independent mediator, such as the family doctor who is in a position of authority to whom the parent will be more responsive. Often, the parent would prefer not to have the children telling them what to do. By bringing in an independent third party, it’s more hopeful that a resolution can be found to the problems. As often happens, we don’t have the nuclear family of old all living close to one another. A son or daughter living far away will, with good intentions, have strong opinions and feel that they are more objective. A financially more astute child might think that management of assets is paramount. A geographically local child might consider personal care overrides.

Elder Mediators and other experts can bring objective assistance to the table for all family members. Not infrequently a combination of experts can assist in the communications and their multifaceted resolutions are extremely helpful. Very often the experts you call will refer you to complementary professionals who can form the team to find the right answer.

We need to address living options, budgeting for now and in the future, physical needs now and for the future, health care needs and, of course, the need for independence while addressing fears regarding aging and loss of control. It is essential that everyone in the family who would like to be part of the process not get pigeonholed into what has been their prior role in the family. Families tend to revert to those roles when they get together, even as adults.

At the end of the day, collaboration is what works. Bringing in an expert to objectively put together a team to resolve the issues while preserving your parents’ dignity and sense of independence is the recipe for the greatest success. We are all human and struggling to resolve

concerns. With longevity we are facing extended life, but new challenges. The benefits certainly outweigh the deficits, but it requires us to find a new way to work together.

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