



Sensitive Family Issues

When Yolanda's father died from a massive stroke seven years ago, she tried to talk to her mother about planning for death or the possibility of becoming mentally unable to make decisions. But both her mother and Yolanda's sisters were superstitious and immediately cut off the conversation.

As time went by, Yolanda's mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease, then colon cancer. Eventually the courts declared her incompetent and unable to make her own decisions. Despite the protesting of her sisters, Yolanda was appointed her mother's guardian and took charge, making a number of unpopular decisions. Sadly, the resulting family bitterness is stronger today than when Yolanda's mother died.



So many of us, no matter what our age, don't want to talk about death, or even about becoming incapacitated mentally or physically. If Yolanda's mother had created, before her health began to fail, a simple legal document called a durable power of attorney, much of the confusion and bitterness may have been avoided.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLANNING AHEAD

A durable power of attorney enables one individual to take care of the personal, healthcare and financial affairs of another. Without such a document, determining how to manage someone's personal affairs can be a frustrating, lengthy process resulting in a court-appointed guardian.

We may feel uncomfortable discussing end-of-life decisions. But changes in medical technology

and the increasing likelihood that each of us—either in our own case or in the case of someone close to us—will be faced with quality-of-life versus quantity-of-life decisions underscores the importance of talking about such matters before a crisis develops.

With increasing frequency, physicians as well as patients are more open about terminally-ill diagnoses. As a result, both individuals and families are more likely to discuss end-of-life decisions. For example, in the death of former First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, we saw significant family participation in these decisions.

Dealing effectively with sensitive issues surrounding illness and death requires realistic expectations and open, respectful communication. If not handled properly, the difficult emotions that



surface during such times might linger or even become permanent.

TOUCHY FAMILY ISSUES

A host of emotionally charged issues can further complicate a family member's illness or death. There's no shortage of potential flashpoints. Here are a few:

Your Personal Care. Do you want the courts to appoint who will take care of you? If not, you need a document such as a durable power of attorney. This allows you to designate who will make health, personal and financial decisions for you if you become unable. Make sure your family members know about this document and your wishes.

Heroic Medical Procedures. Do you want state-of-the-art medical technology to be used to keep you alive when there seems to be no chance of recovery? A living will helps to make sure that your wishes are known. Do you have one? Who knows where it is kept? Who else has copies?

Your Will. Do you know the state has written a will for you if you die without your own? Have you written a will? If so, have you shared the contents with your family? Do they know where you keep your will and other important documents? If you have a will, has the person you designated to settle your estate agreed to do so?

Nursing Homes. Have you shared your feelings toward being placed into a nursing home? Under what conditions would a nursing home be acceptable to you?

Alternatives to Nursing Homes. In-home care and hospice services allow one to remain at home in the later stages of life. Would you choose to stay at home, or would you prefer to stay with one of your children? Which child and why?

Funeral Arrangements. Do you want to be buried or cremated? A traditional service or a memorial service? A simple or elaborate casket?

Would you like flowers, or would you prefer donations to a charitable organization? Which one? It's wise to discuss these and other matters ahead of time so that your wishes are known.

Former Spouses. If you have former spouses and stepchildren, do you want them notified in case of serious illness or death? Should they be invited to the funeral?

Suicide. If a death is caused by suicide, who should know? When, if ever?

AIDS. In the event of an AIDS-related illness or death, who should be told? When? How public should this information be?

Donating Your Organs. Upon death, do you want to donate any of your organs? Which ones? To which hospital or group?

These are a sample of potentially touchy family issues that may involve you or a loved one. Think about your family and friends. What additional sensitive matters might come up with regard to incapacitating illness or death?



GUIDELINES FOR HANDLING SENSITIVE FAMILY ISSUES

- **Look ahead.** Illness and death are part of life. Consider what might happen if someone in your family becomes incapacitated or dies. Identify points of concern and potential conflict.
- **Speak up about your concerns.** Although it might be uncomfortable, talk to someone you trust.
- **Involve family members.** One at a time—or better yet, as a group—discuss your concerns. Sometimes it helps to set up a specific time to talk to loved ones, perhaps over lunch or in a family meeting.
- **See things from the other person’s point of view.** Listen with respect to thoughts, feelings and reactions of others. Try to empathize.
- **Clarify one another’s wishes.** Extend an extra measure of understanding, and try not to take what is said and done too personally. Differences of opinion are healthy. Strive to clearly understand what each person wants.
- **Keep your expectations realistic.** Some family members might want to avoid discussing death. Don’t be frustrated. If necessary, bring in a trusted third party, or consider dropping the topic for now if it’s simply too uncomfortable to handle.
- **Remain creatively flexible.** There’s nearly always more than one right answer or approach. Stay open-minded, and be willing to compromise when essential values are not at stake.

End-of-life decisions are difficult. We can reduce regrets and guilt if we as family members know and are able to carry out the wishes of our loved ones. Early and open discussions about these matters help to smooth the way. Fortunately, when a crisis does occur, family members—either out of love and respect or out of family obligation—usually rally to support one another.

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