

Elder Mediators help brothers and sisters stop fighting and make decisions about aging parents.

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The Ties That Blind

It's tough enough making decisions about elderly parents. What if you don't like the siblings you have to agree with?



The decisions involved in caring for elderly parents can strain siblinghood to the point where mediation is needed

Charlie Powell.

“You should sell her,” Clyde said when his mother came home with a baby sister. That’s the kind of thing jealous big brothers often say when they feel displaced; the comment becomes a cute part of family lore. But Clyde was 13 at the time, too old for cute. His hostility toward his sister Nancy was no passing phase, either. For most of their lives Clyde had nothing but harsh words for Nancy. But when

their mother got old and needed their help, the two siblings were forced to interact—and they didn’t really know how.

Eighty percent of American adults have siblings, and while the love between them can be singularly sweet—two-thirds of adults name a brother or sister as one of their best friends—22 percent consider their relationship “apathetic” or downright “hostile.” Most of the time, your less-than-perfect sibling relationships can sputter along unattended, with contact limited to a noncommittal exchange of Christmas cards. But as your parents age and die, you may be forced to make fateful decisions with siblings you spent most of your life barely tolerating. Even among siblings with good relationships, old hurts, old patterns, old disagreements can erupt again, disguised as fights over whether Dad really needs a nursing home or how to divide up the Royal Doulton figurines.

With 85-plus already the fastest-growing cohort in America, and boomers turning 65 at the rate of 10,000 a day, more and more siblings are struggling with each other over their elderly parents. There are even professional referees for fights like these. An elder mediator gathers squabbling siblings around a table and, for a fee of about \$250 to \$350 an hour, helps them deal with whatever it is they’re really arguing about. The story of Clyde and Nancy and the elder mediators who helped bring them together demonstrates how complicated these struggles can be—and how, in cases involving elderly parents, sadness touches even the happiest of endings.

In elder mediation sessions, the silly slights of childhood can loom large. “It might be as small as the red wagon you got for Christmas that I really wanted,” said Blair Trippe, an elder mediator in Massachusetts and a co-author of *Mom Always Liked You Best: A Guide for Resolving Family Feuds, Inheritance Battles and Eldercare Crises*. These

hurt feelings are difficult to get over, maybe because they seemed so crucial at the time, bubbling out of the complex stew of emotions—love, jealousy, rage, adoration—that siblings stir up in each other. They can also be a bit embarrassing for adults to fess up to. A red wagon? Really?

Clyde and Nancy's mediation session did not begin well. Nancy, a soft-featured woman with a steel-gray bob, was standing outside with her husband waiting to greet Clyde, but he brushed right past her, plopped himself down at the round conference table in mediator Neil Rodar's Burlington, Vt. office, and waited for things to begin. He wasn't at all happy about being there; he had only come because his daughter had insisted.

What brought Clyde and Nancy to mediation was a dispute over whether to take out a reverse mortgage on their 98-year-old mother's tiny house in New Hampshire. Their feisty mother managed to live alone with a succession of paid assistants. But Nancy said the money was about to run out; a reverse mortgage, she said, was the only way to get the cash they needed to keep their mother out of a nursing home. Nancy had power of attorney, but Clyde had taken the deed she needed for the application and refused to turn it over, thinking her real motivation was to get their mother's house for herself.

Nancy always considered Clyde a larger-than-life figure, the much-older brother who wouldn't let her play with his Erector set. In the mediation session, she didn't want to confront Clyde in any way. "I knew he was just going to jump all over me and belittle me, which he was very good at doing," she told me.

By then Clyde, though still handsome, was a physically diminished man. He was almost 77 years old (Nancy was 64), skinny and stooped, his voice half-gone with the loss of one vocal cord to throat cancer and further damage in surgery after his first aneurysm (he'd had two). He was reduced to talking in a raggedy whisper—but even whispering, Clyde was the sort of man who made his opinions known loud and clear.

The mediation got underway with Clyde and Nancy stating and re-stating their grievances in an endless loop. They were trying to be civil, but it wasn't working. All the "I" statements in the world were no match against some of the hurtful things Clyde had said in the past, like that Nancy had no initiative and would never amount to anything—a blistering comment that rang in her head even as she sat in Neal Rodar's conference room more than 50 years later.

So many of the stories I've heard from adult siblings in conflict might cause an outsider to think, "Grow up, already." These are men and women in their 50s and 60s bickering over small injustices, and not only the old ones left over from when they were kids: not getting invited to a nephew's wedding, not getting enough help packing on the day Mom and Dad moved, not getting the retirement ring you wanted that Dad gave to your sister.

Some people enter mediation almost as afraid of succeeding as they are of failing. "If I make up with my sister," one client said to Trippe, "how are we going to relate? What are we going to fight about if we can't fight over the house?"

After lunch, Susanne Terry, Rodar's mentor and co-mediator in this case, opened the afternoon session by turning to Nancy. "This is really going to sound stupid," she said, using a mediator's trick of placing all blame for lack of insight on herself. "But please explain it again to so Neal and I can understand: Why is this reverse mortgage such a big deal?"

Nancy walked them through it, explaining how it all would work in dollars and cents. As she spoke, it became clear how worried she had been, how many nights she had lost sleep over it, how urgent she thought the situation was. "Clyde was jolted," said Terry later. "He was completely unaware that the finances could have that effect."

"Oh, my, I hadn't realized," Clyde said when Nancy said she was unable to sleep at night. It was the first of a series of aha moments that peppered the rest of the afternoon.

The emotional exchange went on for another five minutes, each apologizing again and again for not having understood the other's point of view. Finally Nancy said, "I haven't hugged you in a long time. Would you like a hug?" Clyde bolted to his feet and opened his arms.

Nancy went around the table to embrace Clyde. Everyone, even the mediators, burst into tears.

“That went well,” Nancy said to her husband when they finally got back to their car. As they were about to pull out, Clyde walked up to Nancy’s side and tapped on the window. He leaned in. “We’ve laid the foundation,” he told her. “Now we can build the house.” Nancy wasn’t sure how much to believe this—Clyde was a smooth talker, and hadn’t he said such things before?—but she reveled in the sentiment nonetheless.

The day after the mediation, Clyde collapsed from a third aneurysm. He was taken by helicopter to Mass General for surgery, and six days later, on June 4, 2008, he died.

“I think that this was a lifetime of animosity that had come to a halt,” Clyde’s daughter Sally told me recently. “I think my dad finally facing it and stepping up and saying, ‘All right, I need help, we’ll work this out,’ and stepping toward his sister for the first time in his life—I think it was a big reason that he was able to let go.”

But there’s a coda to this story, one that shows that transformations aren’t built in a day, and that elder-care issues can get the best of even newly-repaired sibling relationships.

The truth is that most siblings manage on their own to get past childhood feuds. Parents die, friends disappear, spouses leave through either death or divorce, but brothers and sisters endure. As the losses of middle age accumulate, siblings often become more and more important. Sibling ties might fray, but they also have a quality that sociologist Ingrid Connidis calls “a taken-for-grantedness.” Connidis interviewed 60 sibling pairs, ranging in age from 25 to 89, to see how their relationships changed over the life span. Feelings of loyalty and love remained dormant, she wrote, “to be rekindled or ‘mobilized’ only when needed.” Connidis called it “intimacy at a distance.”

Clyde’s sudden death after embracing Nancy helped sear the family’s mediation session in the memories of everyone who witnessed it. What better demonstration of the power of conciliation than a man finally able to rest in peace after he makes amends with the sister he has kept at arm’s length for so long? “It was a good note for him to leave on,” Nancy said. “A person’s got to hope that if we’d had the chance to work on things we’d have become much closer.”

But the story’s coda suggests a different interpretation—not about the blessing of rapprochement with a long-estranged sibling, but about its fragility. What Clyde most wanted was for his mother to live out her life in her own home. But Nancy says the reverse mortgage didn’t come through fast enough, and she ran out of money to pay for round-the-clock home health aides. So three weeks after their mediation—and two weeks after Clyde’s death—Nancy moved their mother into a nursing home, where she lived (unhappily, according to Sally, Clyde’s daughter) for another two years. She died there shortly after her 100th birthday.

Sally says she tries not to judge her aunt Nancy too harshly—her grandmother did take a sharp decline after Clyde’s death and probably did need to be in a nursing home—but she felt stung by how quickly Nancy made the decision without consulting anyone. She prefers to focus on the mediation session, and the hug. “We all celebrate that moment,” Sally says. “That was a golden moment.”

Nancy’s quick turnaround shows that rapprochements can be tenuous, especially in feuds that have festered for a lifetime. Many mediation clients need to come back for further sessions, but these two never got a chance, and their still-unresolved issues took on a life of their own. As Max Rivers, a family mediator in Philadelphia, often tells his clients, old wounds between siblings are like beach balls. “You can hold them under water, but they never give up,” he said. “As soon as you stop holding them down, they resurface.”

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