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A Systematic Method For Making Difficult Decisions

Everyday we make countless decisions. Most of them seem automatic, like deciding what to eat or wear or even driving to work. Other decisions require more information or time.

The difficulty of decision-making increases as we become less familiar with a subject or as the consequences of our decisions appear serious or permanent. Decisions affecting our happiness or the happiness and well-being of a loved one are particularly difficult. You may already be in the midst of considering such life-changing decisions as selecting a retirement community, dealing with Alzheimer's Disease in a loved one, providing good home health care for an ailing senior parent or deciding on nursing home placement.

Like many people in your situation, you are probably feeling many emotions . . . anticipation, anxiety or fear of change, to say the least. If you are considering placing a spouse, parent or family member in a nursing home, these feelings could include guilt, depression, fear of censure and even resentment.

One good approach for dealing with these feelings and coming to a decision is to draw from how you dealt with previous difficult decisions in your life: changing jobs; making a long-distance move away from family, friends, and familiar surroundings; divorce; death; or a serious illness in the family. Here is one formal process you might find helpful in making a decision. These steps are designed to help you keep an emotional distance as much as possible and as difficult as it will be.

The steps are:

1. Assess the situation
2. Set goals or determine a solution
3. Gather information
4. Develop a plan to reach your goals
5. Establish a trial period
6. Evaluate the trial period/make adjustments

Assess the Situation

Sometimes this first step involves listing all the areas that are problems or that concern you. Break through the isolation. Describe the situation and then ask someone else, a friend, family member or your adult children, to do the same. After this soul-searching, one or more problems will usually be evident. You may worry more than you think you should about your health, lack of significant relationships or social activities. Or you could be concerned about the fact that your senior parent forgets to eat or bathe properly or take her medicine. Perhaps you just wonder what services are available to you and your family.

Set Goals

Once the problems have been defined, you need to clearly state your goals. This step is essential for effective decision-making. You can seek help through family, friends, health experts, professionals, spiritual advisors and support groups, but the goal-setting has to be done by you. Once you've set goals, everyone involved will have a better understanding of when changes might occur.

Gather Information

The importance of this step can't be over-emphasized. At this time in your life, income is probably limited and the ability to bounce back from mistakes is less. If you are contemplating nursing home placement for an elderly loved one, ask yourself the following questions. Have all other alternatives been exhausted? Does the physician who recommended a nursing home fully understand your loved one as a complete person? Is this decision based on the best interests of the family as a whole?

Having answered these questions, your next step will probably be to compare facilities. No single nursing home is best for every senior requiring assistance in living. The first step is to make a list of facilities that will meet your requirements for care and your budget restraints. Now it's time to compare facilities. If you are considering a retirement center, tour many, making several visits if possible. Once financial eligibility and level of care have been established, ask yourself which center makes you feel most comfortable and is most likely to meet your physical, emotional and intellectual needs?

If nursing home placement is needed, compare facilities well in advance of need (throughout this decision-making process, it is critical to keep the person who is to be admitted to the nursing home involved in the selection process. This can determine the success or failure of the placement). Things to evaluate include: the comfort level inside the facility, the appearance of the residents, activities of the residents, and interaction between the staff and the outside environment.

Develop a Plan

Next, draw up a plan of action. Which of your alternatives appeal to you and best suits your needs and budget? The objective is to arrive at a choice that will provide the most advantages and the fewest drawbacks, and is acceptable to as many persons involved as possible. Be aware that this decision-making process may end in a decision to leave things as they are.

Establish a Trial Period

Since decisions late in life often end up being permanent, a trial period is recommended. Stay in a nursing home on a temporary basis. See if family members live up to their agreement to visit and provide transportation. The important thing is that everyone involved really tries to make the arrangement work. Try to agree ahead of time how success will be measured.

Evaluate the Trial Period

After you've evaluated the trial period, you can adjust your thinking, make permanent plans or set a different goal. Having agreed to this review process ahead of time enables everyone to admit that the plan is working out better than expected or more poorly. If needed, enlist the help of an outside party; a professional counselor, support group, your minister or lawyer.

Making decisions can be difficult and painful, especially later in life. Using this systematic approach to decision-making can be helpful. Whatever your decision, you'll feel better having made it with all options clear to you and the best interests of everyone having been fully examined.