

Dealing with Family Denial

As your parents and other elderly relatives age, younger family members may not want to confront the fact that these elders will gradually need more help with their daily lives. Our parents and other elders, after all, are the ones who have always taken care of everyone else. When they begin to need help, younger family members may at first deny the signs; they may make excuses for their elders' behavior, not admit that there are problems or deny that they need any help. Even the spouse of an elder needing increasing levels of care may be in denial about the situation.

Such denial is actually rooted in the inability or lack of desire to confront the emotions that an elder needing help may provoke. Relatives watching the decline of an elder will likely experience a mix of emotions—fear, shame, anxiety, frustration, and anger—without consciously understanding these emotions. And the fact that the decline may be gradual allows the denial to continue indefinitely, until there is a medical emergency, a hospital stay or some other crisis.

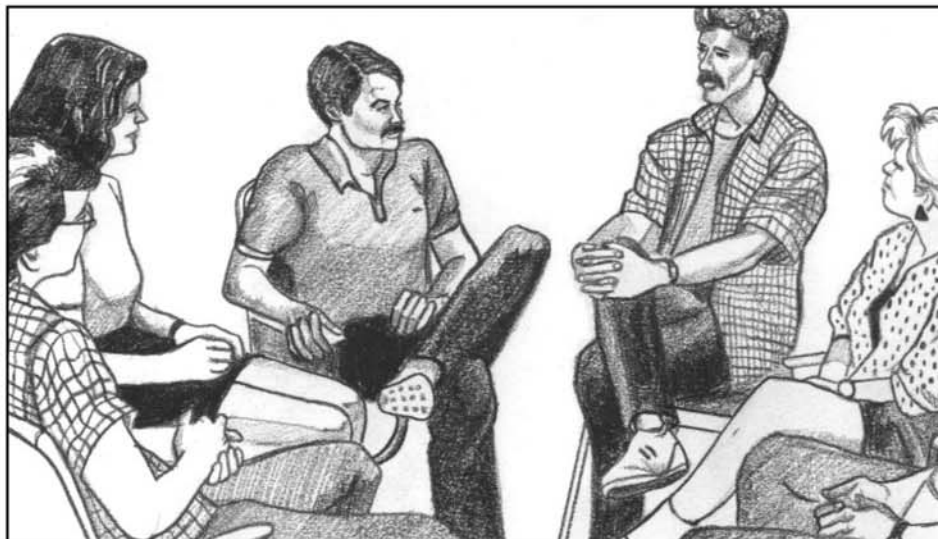
What is the best way to deal with this family denial before there is a crisis? How can you get beyond denial so that the person who needs care gets it? Here are some tips:

Seek Professional Help

Counselors, therapists and social workers may all be able to help work through family denial and other emotional issues. Try to find a professional that you trust and who is able to meet with your family as a group to work out some of the issues at hand. A geriatric care manager—as a third party removed from the emotional stresses of the family—is also a good choice for helping a family to work through some of its problems and for managing the concrete aspects of daily care.

Communicate

Communication between all family members is key to working out a care plan for an elder in need. If you are noticing that your elder's health or abilities are failing—and that other family members are in denial—arrange for a time when you all can get together with the elder to talk about the situation. Ask the elder what kind of help might be needed. Give all the family members a chance to air their opinions and emotions—and try to work out a plan for dealing with any current and future crises. In order to maintain harmony, if possible, plan a monthly family meeting, to take place either in person or on a conference-type call, where everyone can be updated and all concerns can be heard.



Clear communication among family members is key to the success of a care plan.