



The Magic of Elder Mediation

by JUDY BERANGER

I thought we were a close family – until Mom needed care. Of six children, two of us were doing the lion's share. Our other siblings didn't even want to discuss how they might help. On the Doctor's recommendation our family participated in mediation and two of my other sisters who had been very reluctant at first, committed to sharing some of the load.

Elder Mediation, also called mediation with age related issues, is a form of mediation that is concerned specifically with age-related issues at home, in the community or in the workplace. Traditionally it was utilized by families and organizations with regard to health care, estate and other later life concerns, but today it is also utilized in the workplace arena for age-related situations. Elder Mediation is a process where a trained mediator creates a safe and respectful environment to facilitate conversations with a focus on heightening quality of life for all involved. The myriad of changes and stresses that occur are addressed and plans are put in place to best direct available and willing energy and resources. The conversations are initiated as a result of a direct concern, a brewing conflict or in response to anticipated changes. If distance is a problem, participation in the mediation can be through telephone or other internet-based communication methods (e.g. Skype, Facetime, etc.)

Supporting Each Other When Times Are Difficult

Teachers are not exempt from the stresses that can occur as a result of being the older person on staff or as a result of supporting older family members. A Certified Elder Mediator is sensitized to the importance of empathy and to the nuances that present with the occurrence of age-related issues. A skilled mediator can support all involved to engage in constructive, essential conversations when expectations are high or when conflict may be present. The mediation process can help preserve, improve, and sometimes even restore relationships.

I can retire at any time but will continue working. I love teaching and I am not the retiring type. I was frustrated with the jokes about my age along with subtle pressure to free up my position. I talked with my principal about what felt like harassment. He suggested media-

tion and asked the others to participate. I was amazed at how quickly we were able to talk. One of the three actually apologized! After the mediation, I felt less anxious. The ageist jokes and disrespectful comments decreased.

Elder Mediation can accommodate either small or larger numbers of participants who are interested in making a difference. Present strengths and common values are explored. When work related, all who were involved with the situation, or just the two or three who were directly involved, may be in attendance. If desired, it is not uncommon to include appropriate professionals and service providers. When it is family related it can include the family and others the family knows who are willing to give support or share expertise.

We invited Mom's sister and Dad's brother to the mediation to talk about supporting Mom with Dad's care since breaking his hip. The stress had really escalated in our family with Mom's daily calls and demands. The mediation helped in getting all of us more involved. I can actually concentrate on school for a change. With the extra support I didn't feel guilty anymore and didn't have to be on the run the minute I left school. My brothers, who rarely did anything in the past, are helping more. They realized I was at the breaking point. Even though we have escalating needs and demands in regard to my parents it seems like we are stronger as a family.

Elder Mediation presents an opportunity for heightened understanding and a challenge to release old stereotypes. It is not uncommon for at least one of the participants to be unaware that something is wrong, while another feels overwhelmed by present expectations. When the mediation is family related it allows for one to experience relatives in the present day context – not seeing them in the roles remembered from the past. If you enjoyed your family time together as children and were always there for each other, you are more able to respond to new challenges. Alternatively, if the growing up years were difficult you may be harboring sadness, biases and assumptions that may or may not represent reality in today's adult world. Families frequently report that most members – regardless of their earlier role in the family – are moved by the Elder Mediation process to provide more cooperative support.

Attitudinal barriers can also create havoc, both in family and work settings. Ageism, considered to be one of the most “accepted” forms of discrimination, is rampant. Age discrimination claims are on the rise in Canada and HR departments are promoting heightened respect and elimination of ageist language and jokes. Human Rights Tribunals are moving to zero tolerance for inappropriate behaviours and comments related to age. It is not uncommon to use Elder Mediation in those situations.

Shawna was avoiding conversations with her colleagues. She had endured endless comments about her age, about being behind the times, set in her ways, being technically illiterate, taking up a good job and numerous ageist jokes all “said in jest”. In mediation she told her colleagues how very hurtful and ageist this was. As it turned out the colleagues didn’t realize how disrespectful they were and agreed to stop.

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Mediation builds trust in the workplace and is known to reduce disrespect and bullying. As in the above case, when ageism is reduced, conflict lessens and productivity increases. Elder Mediation is also becoming recognized as an important step on the continuum of care for older family members – often reducing conflict, promoting wellness, developing prevention strategies and enhancing quality of life. The focus is on addressing identified concerns and issues, while maintaining and strengthening the myriad of relationships critical to overall well-being. Issues that are addressed include financial, retirement, job related transfers, promotions, relationships, health care, intergenerational, caregiving, estate planning – any issue that may create or has created conflict.

Our son doesn’t want anyone to find out that we were attending elder mediation and said he felt ashamed. He is studying in the medical field and wants us all to present as the perfect little family. His talk with the elder mediator before the sessions helped him understand what this was. He decided to attend and to let go of the perfect family image.

Witnessing resilience is common in Elder Mediation. Relationships are often strengthened, confidence grows, close bonds are established, and in some situations are re-established.

We were going in circles for three years. Decisions were being dragged out and painful. Even though my

anxiety was high I spent my entire summer holidays looking after Dad. It took a few sessions but we were all surprised at how participating in elder mediation changed things for us in good ways. As a result of most of us chipping in, we were able to keep Dad in his own home – his deepest wish.

Research has demonstrated that the Elder Mediation process can reduce the overall stress in systems, enhances the functionality of the support network and heightens interpersonal communications. It has been shown that the appropriate application of Mediation to age-related issues appears to result in significant cost savings to families, to organizations and to government. Research from such organizations as the *Respite and Relief Elder Mediation Program* in Cornwall, Ontario, is but one example of many research initiatives that is reporting these promising outcomes.

There is a tale from the Middle East that captures the essence of mediation. A father gave 17 camels to his three sons – 1/2 to his eldest, 1/3 to his middle son and 1/9 to his youngest. The sons were delighted with the gift but it didn’t take long for conflict to erupt. “How can I take 1/2 of 17 camels?” the eldest asked. The others agreed. Not knowing how to do the proper split they decided to consult a wise elder in the village. She advised them to resolve this issue on their own and to assist in the outcome, she gave them one of her camels so they would have 18. The 3 sons went away to try again. The eldest son took his 1/2 of the 18 camels (9), the middle son took his 1/3 (6), and the youngest son took his 1/9th share (2). After taking their share there was still 1 camel left – which they returned to the wise elder! Supporting people to find that “18th camel” is part of the magic of Elder Mediation.

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