



Family Dynamics: *Why Can't We Agree?*

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Who is Tamara?

Tamara Statz, MA, LMFT

- University of Minnesota
 - Residential Care Transition Module (RCTM) research
 - Flyer on the back table!
- Vibrant Living Senior Services, LLC
 - Private practice
 - In-home mental health therapy for seniors and their families / caregivers

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Why are we here?

Let's differentiate...

- FAMILY DYNAMICS
 - Brother who lives in Washington and never calls
 - Dad avoids conflict
- FAMILY CONFLICT
 - Usually over email
 - Sister hangs up when she gets mad
- AREAS OF CONFLICT
 - Mom's care plan
 - How often brother goes to visit (or doesn't visit, for that matter)

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Grief and Loss



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Grief and Loss

- Family dynamics, history, and expectations regarding grief, loss, mourning, etc.
- Everyone grieves differently
- Different levels of everyone's grief causes different responses
 - Try to keep this in mind as everyone may be needing something different
 - This is even more complicated with past traumas in the family – abuse, unresolved conflict, etc.

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Grief and Loss

- Grief MYTHS:
 - Linear
 - Clear START and FINISH
 - Limited to expressions sadness and anger
 - You can only grieve a death
 - Someone with a similar experience will understand and be supportive
 - You cannot grieve someone who is still alive

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Grief and Loss

- Grief TRUTHS:
 - Can be many emotions all at once
 - Ebbs and flows like waves
 - Can stay with us indefinitely
 - Is completely individual to each person
 - Not everyone needs to talk*
 - Some individuals need to turn inward to process
 - Not everyone needs to cry*
 - Some individuals need to express emotions in other ways such as exercise, creativity, writing
 - *or at least not as much as we might think
 - You can grieve someone who is still alive
 - *Ambiguous Loss* – Pauline Boss (1999)

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Grief and Loss

- The Extended Grief Cycle
 - http://changingminds.org/disciplines/change_management/kubler_ross/kubler_ross.htm
 - Shock*: Initial paralysis at hearing the bad news
 - Denial: Trying to avoid the inevitable
 - Anger: Frustrated outpouring of bottled-up emotion
 - Bargaining: Seeking in vain for a way out
 - Depression: Final realization of the inevitable
 - Testing*: Seeking realistic solutions
 - Acceptance: Finally finding the way forward

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The Two-Track Model of Bereavement

on infographic brought to you by windyoungrief.com
by Simon Shimshon Rubin, PhD
University of Illinois

TRACK I

where are strengths and difficulties?

how is biopsychosocial function?

ANXIETY
Thoughts & feelings: what are the degree & frequency of these, what triggers & what mitigates these responses?

DEPRESSION
Thoughts & feelings: what are the degree & frequency of these, what triggers & what mitigates these responses?

SOMATIC CONCERNS
What is the current state of physical processes as appetite, sleep, sexual drive & general health concerns?

TRAUMATIC RESPONSES
What is the degree & duration of trauma symptoms? Could there be PTSD or Acute Stress Disorder?

FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS
What is the current relationship to spouse, parent, children, siblings, & extended family? What has changed for positive or negative?

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS
What is the current relationship to friends, colleagues, neighbors? Who has changed for positive or negative?

SELF-ESTEEM
Is there a sense of self as helpless, incompetent, unlikable, & stigmatized to grow?

MEANING STRUCTURE
How have values, world-view, spirituality, religion, or ethical understanding changed?

WORK
Is it possible to adequately (or more adequately) meet demands at work?

INVESTMENT IN LIFE TASKS
Is there energy/motivation for tasks beyond just existing? Has there been any growth?

TRACK II

what is the nature of the relationship with the deceased?

what are adaptive strengths and weaknesses?

RECONNECTION
What is the nature, character, and strength of the wish to reconnect with the person who died?

IMAGERY AND MEMORY
What is the degree, content, & nature of what is remembered of the deceased and the relationship to the deceased?

EMOTIONAL CLOSENESS
What is the degree of emotional closeness to the person who died? How do you communicate about the person and the relationship to that person?

POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS/AFFECT
What positive perceptions & affects are present when thinking about the person who died? What stimulates positive feelings?

PREOCCUPATION WITH THE LOSS
What is the degree of loss preoccupation? What stimulates positive feelings? What pre-occupation or mitigates the pre-occupation thinking about the loss/lost person? What stimulates negative feelings?

NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS/AFFECT
What negative perceptions & affects are present when thinking about the person who died? What stimulates negative feelings?

CONFLICT
To what degree is the person who died remembered as someone who had been a problematic relationship?

THE LOSS TRAJECTORY
Reconfigure the understanding of "stages" of loss in order to best represent the loss.

UPSETTING IMPACT ON SELF-SYSTEM
Have there been feelings of lower self-esteem, such as loss of confidence, self-worth?

MEMORIALIZATION & TRANSFORMATION
Have there been meaningful ways found to memorialize the person who died?

Sources: The Two-Track Model of Bereavement, image created from concepts from Worden, With The Deceased, Multiple Losses, 1983, pp. 117-118; Kubler-Ross, On Death & Dying, 1969, pp. 117-118; Kubler-Ross, On Death & Dying, 1969, pp. 117-118.

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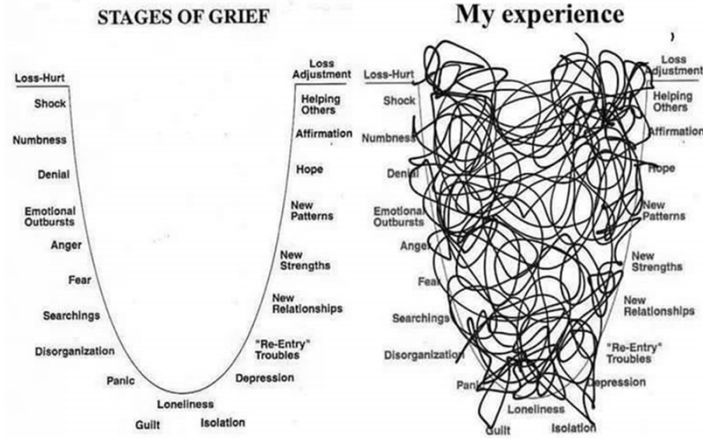
BALL OF GRIEF

A TANGLED "BALL" OF EMOTIONS

What would you add?

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Grief



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Family Meetings



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Family Meetings

Can you have these effectively on your own?

- If not, would you consider hiring someone to help?
 - Wilder Caregiver Services
 - Social Worker at the facility
- It can be helpful to have a neutral professional in the room to facilitate the discussion and stay on topic
- Handout on back table: *Holding a Family Meeting*

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Family Meetings

VALUES

- What does each member of your family have in common?
 - Everyone wants Mom to be comfortable and have a good life, and be happy
 - So, what are the steps that can be taken to make that happen?
- If you approach problem-solving from a place of mutual values, that can re-orient the conversation from conflict to cooperation

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Family Meetings

- It's OK to take a time-out!
 - If things are getting “heated” and the conversation is no longer productive...
 - Take a time-out, AND...
 - Schedule a time to return to the conversation
 - Within 24 hours
- Meet in a neutral location
 - Conference room at the facility
 - Library study room
 - Coffee shop meeting room

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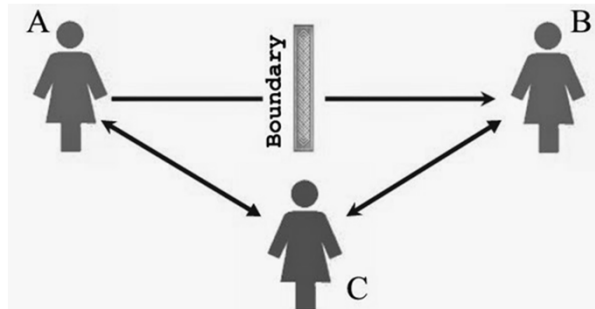
Family Meetings

- How to talk directly to the person, and not create “triangles”
 - Triangulation
 - Using another person as a substitute or messenger for communication
 - Usually to express dissatisfaction with the main person
 - Example:
 - Brother and Sister are having conflict over how much money is being spent on Mom's birthday party
 - Brother talks to Father about what he thinks and how Sister is wrong
 - Father talks to Sister about how Brother is feeling

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Triangulation



Triangulation occurs when person A has a boundary that person B does not want to respect. To get around the boundary, person B establishes a relationship with a third person C who is close to person A and uses that person to get "inside" with person A by proxy, hence violating the boundary.

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Family Meetings

- How to talk directly to the person, and not create "triangles"
 - Ask yourself:
 - WHAT is the **problem**
 - WHO is **involved**
 - WHERE and WHEN can **everyone be together to talk**
 - Avoid "venting" to other interested parties
 - Can form alliances that are not helpful
 - Creates more problems than solutions

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Family Meetings

- Remember:
 - We are only responsible and in control of **ourselves**
 - Family dynamics bring out the BEST and WORST in others, which might be cause for surprise
 - In good and bad ways..
 - This does not have to be permanent
 - But it can be, if you are not intentional
 - Be open to forgiving others

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Family Meetings

- Remember:
 - Caregiving can be a time of high stress and burnout
 - We do not all operate at our top capacity in this situation
 - Cut yourself and others some “slack”
 - Give yourself and others room to be imperfect
 - DO YOUR BEST
 - This might inspire others to do their best, as well

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Power of Attorney (POA)

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Power of Attorney (POA)

- Can be a tricky decision to assign this role
 - How to decide who should fill this role?
 - Oldest child? Closest geographically? Current or past career in a medical field? Only child?
 - Does one child cover Medical POA and another Financial POA?
 - And then the person in the role is responsible for meaningful and often painful decision-making
 - The intensity of which might not be acknowledged by other family members

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Power of Attorney (POA)

- Is that the source of conflict?
 - Is the POA/decision-maker angry with the rest of the family? Feeling “dumped on?”
 - Is s/he not open to having others help or not asking for help, and yet feels resentful?
- How can everyone chip in besides POA duties?
 - Shovel the walk, mow the lawn
 - Paint the house and garage
 - Grocery shop and make meals
 - Buy clothes
 - Etc.

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Power of Attorney (POA)

- Work with each other’s strengths
 - Example:
 - Brother goes to the library to get books for mom
 - Other brother attends appointments with her
 - Both are filling roles that play into their strengths
- Expand your idea of what “participating” means
 - Lengthy visits are not the only way
 - Besides, comparing lengths of visits is a black hole..

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Power of Attorney (POA)

- When discussing issues, is the information presented each time based on information the Person With Dementia wrote as a guideline to decisions?
 - Utilize the Advance Directive
 - Rather than POA deciding, regardless of everyone else's feelings
- Return to: WHAT DOES MOM WANT
 - Not what does Tony want, and Sarah, and Joni

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Power of Attorney (POA)

- Do not be surprised if there are conflicting ideas about what types of care should be provided and for how long
 - Access quality information from the healthcare provider or Advance Directive Facilitator in order to make educated decisions
 - Or to help family members understand WHY decisions have been made as they have
- Remember
 - The role of POA can be stressful, intense, important, and meaningful all at once
 - Can you have empathy for what your sibling is going through?

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Communication

- How often does your family touch-base?
 - How often is “necessary” might be hard to agree on
 - However, clear and consistent, frequent communication can alleviate “unknowns” that can get blown out of proportion
- Checking in with each other:
 - “Are you okay?”
 - “This seems to be a difficult topic.”
 - “Is there something you would like to share?”

Communication

- Avoid **triangulation** (previously mentioned)
 - Communicate directly with the person at hand
- Focus on the **current issue**
 - Not reliving/retelling past hurts
- What is the **desired outcome** of the conversation

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Communication

- Is there a time to sit and just discuss how everyone is feeling?
 - Letting everyone know that it is ok to disagree
 - Important to respect everyone's feelings.
 - Relationships can be very different
 - Especially due to past hurts among the family members
 - Some may not even be aware of past hurts

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Communication

- Other systems can help:
 - Google Calendar
 - Share a calendar as a family
 - Everyone can see and edit as needed
 - <https://calendar.google.com>
 - Slack
 - Designed for team work
 - Group messaging and to-do list management
 - <https://slack.com>

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Family Disputes and Disagreements



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Family Disputes and Disagreements

- Remember, each member has a history in the family
 - Dynamics play out here
- Birth order
 - Older siblings “know more”
 - Youngest was “spoiled” and should contribute more now because of it
- Again, it’s OK to take a time-out!
 - If things are getting “heated” and the conversation is no longer productive...
 - Take a time-out, AND...
 - Schedule a time to return to the conversation
 - Within 24 hours

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Family Disputes and Disagreements

- **How to diffuse family disputes effectively**
 - ***Part 1: Encourage the right mentality***
 1. Think about everyone’s perspective
 2. Reflect on how the conflict affects other family members
 3. Ask other family members how they are feeling
 4. Look for the underlying issue

[Lindsay Oliver, LPC 2017](#)

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Family Disputes and Disagreements

- **How to diffuse family disputes effectively**
 - ***Part 2: Have a healthy discussion***
 1. Establish ground rules for a healthy discussion
 2. Encourage everyone to discuss their emotions
 3. Paraphrase people's thoughts
 4. Make sure everyone has a chance to express themselves

Lindsay Oliver, LPC 2017

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Family Disputes and Disagreements

- **How to diffuse family disputes effectively**
 - ***Part 3: Find a way to move forward***
 1. Work on healing the relationships
 2. Strive for forgiveness
 3. Keep your expectations realistic

Lindsay Oliver, LPC 2017

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Family Disputes and Disagreements

- Four Steps of Conflict Resolution
 1. **Separate** person from the problem
 2. Focus on **outcome not position**
 3. Utilize **brainstorming** method for solution generation
 4. Choose **solution** and choose **time period** and **method of measurement**

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Family Disputes and Disagreements

- Return to **values**
 - What do we know is important to Mom?
 - Afterall, this is about *her* care
 - Not the petty disagreements or past hurts we have
 - Can recenter the conversation and bring focus
 - COMMON GOAL
 - Mom's comfort, quality of life, happiness, etc.

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Family Disputes and Disagreements

- What do to when family members do not agree
 - Is it possible to **agree to disagree**?
 - Is this something that absolutely requires that every member be “on-board”?
 - Probably not...
 - Think about how this affects the person with dementia
 - Afterall, this whole caregiving experience is about them, providing them quality care and the best decisions at the time, with the information that you have
 - For their benefit, reduce conflict

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Family Involvement (or lackthereof)



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Family Involvement

- Family members who are not involved/available but who want to guilt others
 - Keeping Mom at home rather than a facility, but not being available to provide help
- Is a family member afraid of the terminal diagnosis or thought of death?
 - Staying away because they personally have not dealt with their mortality
 - Thought of another person dying is overwhelming

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Family Involvement

- How to handle the “out of town” sibling
 - Swoops in at the last minute, “No, Mom wants CPR!”
 - Often s/he experiences guilt over being unavailable
 - Might not be able to say so, however
 - Comes back to communication
 - Consistent, inclusive communication via email or calendar, conference-calls
 - You might not get a response, but *you know you sent it*, you did your part

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Family Involvement

- Keep your side of the street clean
 - Do your part
 - Do your best, whatever that is at the time
- Trust that others are doing their best
 - Comparison is a **trap**
 - Their “best” might not look like yours

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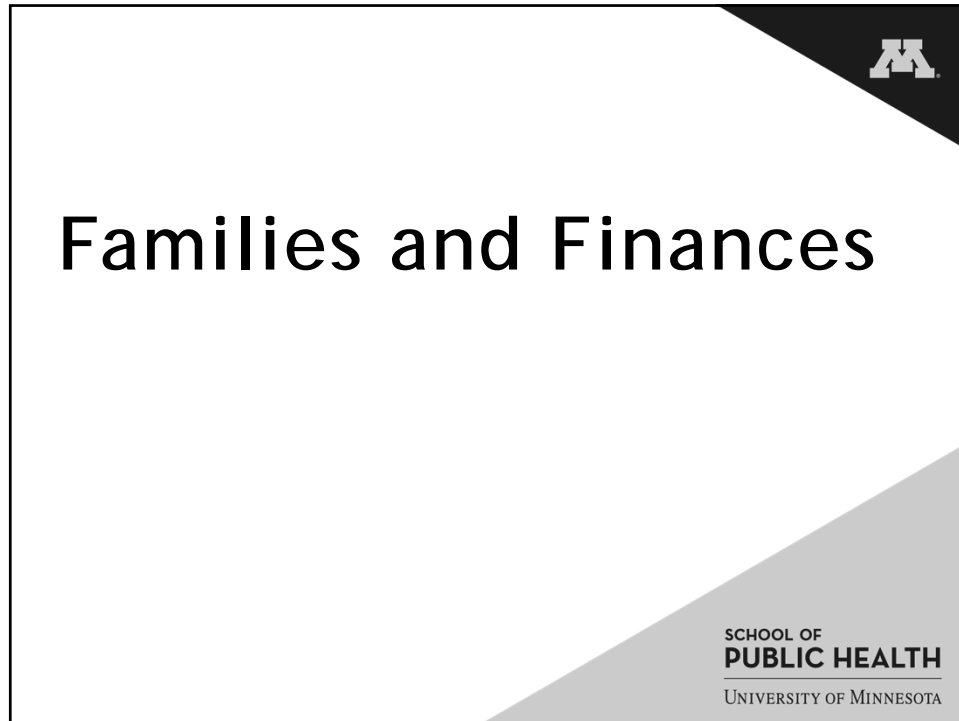


Family Involvement

- At the end of the day, are you satisfied with your involvement? Can you say, “I did my best.” ?
- Whether other not other family members are going to feel regret later over lack of involvement, that is for them to experience and decide

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Families and Finances

- The two toughest things to talk about..
 - Sex and money
- Why this can get tricky..
 - Inheritance
 - How well money is being managed
 - How much care costs
 - Different views of money / spending among siblings
 - Deciding on which care, how much care, which facility

Families and Finances

- Communication
 - How to explain to siblings why Dad needs to spend some of his savings for added help at home
 - Do you schedule regular, quarterly family meetings to address all topics, including finances?

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Families and Finances

- Decisions
 - That the person with memory loss is the priority
 - Then there can be discussions about money that remains
 - Another area to agree to disagree
 - Is consensus *really* necessary?
- Financial POA
 - Who did Mom or Dad entrust with this task?
 - There is probably a reason why s/he was chosen

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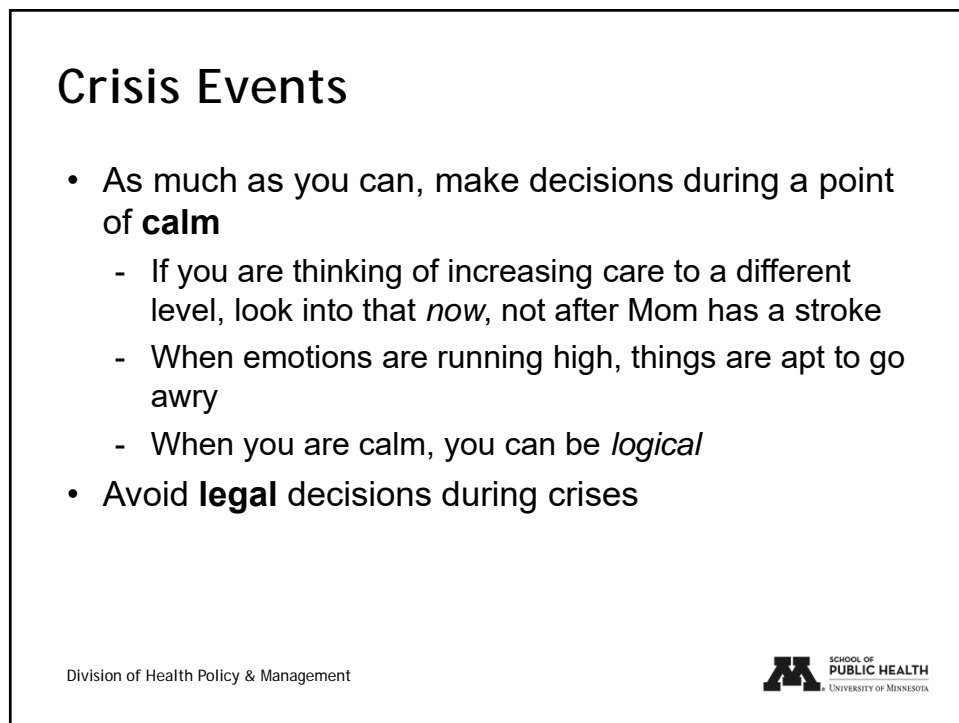




A title slide for a presentation. The background is white with a black triangle in the top right corner containing the University of Minnesota 'M' logo. The text 'Crisis Events' is centered in a large, bold, black font. In the bottom right corner, there is a grey triangle containing the text 'SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH' and 'UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA' in a smaller, black font.

Crisis Events

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A content slide for a presentation. The background is white. The text 'Crisis Events' is at the top left in a large, bold, black font. Below it is a bulleted list of points. At the bottom left, it says 'Division of Health Policy & Management'. At the bottom right, there is a logo for the School of Public Health, University of Minnesota.

Crisis Events

- As much as you can, make decisions during a point of **calm**
 - If you are thinking of increasing care to a different level, look into that *now*, not after Mom has a stroke
 - When emotions are running high, things are apt to go awry
 - When you are calm, you can be *logical*
- Avoid **legal** decisions during crises

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Crisis Events

- Crises bring in elements of **fear** and **pain** over current circumstances
- They can be *opportunities* to make changes in care that have been needed for some time
 - After it becomes quite apparent that a change is needed
 - But this is not a good reason to wait to make changes

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Trust



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Trust

- We could take about this topic alone for 2 hours..
- Caregiving and decision-making can bring out the **best** and **worst** in family members
- Caregiving can build **character** in individuals

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Trust

- How to rebuild trust in a family after it has been broken, in this context
 - Remember what you know of this person, whom you have known for 40 years
 - People change, but not *that* fast
 - Was s/he trustworthy before?
 - Do you believe that s/he can be trustworthy again?
 - Remember, no situation *has* to be **permanent**
 - Things are constantly changing and evolving

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Trust

- How to rebuild trust
 - Take some time apart to cool-off
 - Utilize conflict resolution skills
 - Focus on the outcome you **want**
 - Do not dredge up the past
 - Forgive as you can (it is good for you, too)
 - Time can help
- Family therapy

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Legal Issues



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Legal Issues

- These can be very hard and loaded with emotion and meaning
 - Can drive a wedge between family members
- As much as possible, work things out while Mom and Dad can make their own decisions and get them into legal documentation
- Take time to think things through and discuss
 - Use a mediator or elder law attorney as needed

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To end on a good note..



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Good Notes

- Not all families experience conflict – there are always exceptions to the rule!
 - I saw this in my own family – 12 siblings!
- Caregiving can be an intense time of individual and family growth
 - It can stabilize or solidify familial bonds
- **This does not have to be a time of intense conflict**

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Community Resources

- Wilder Caregiving Services
 - 651-280-CARE (2273) email caregiving@wilder.org
- Minnesota Board on Aging
 - <http://www.mnaging.net/Advisor/Caregiver.aspx>
 - Handout on back table: Holding A Family Meeting
- Minnesota Association of Area Agencies on Aging
 - <http://www.mn4a.org/>
- FamilyMeans Caregiver Support Program
 - <https://www.familymeans.org/help-for-caregivers.html>
- Volunteers of America (VOA)
 - <https://www.voamnwi.org/community-services-for-seniors>

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Thank You!

- Questions?
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