

NOTE

Magical Thinking and Aging Parents

Aging creates complexity and emotional burden. Aging parents find themselves facing situations and decisions that are hard to figure out and even more challenging to manage. They feel overwhelmed and understandably look for ways to simplify complexities and ease burdens. One of the quickest and most effect techniques is magical thinking.

Magical thinking is the respectable cousin of denial. It doesn't pretend there isn't a problem. Instead, it offers an unrealistic solution. Problem solved. Here's an example.

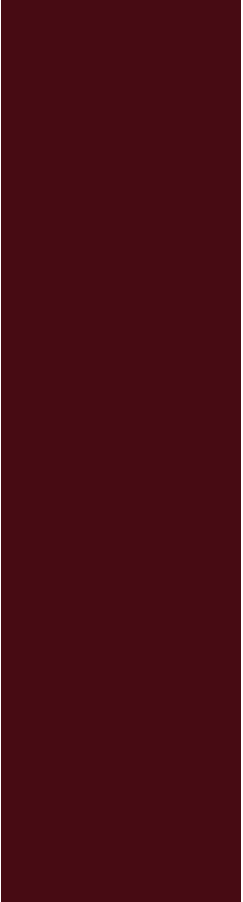
Ann's parents are finding it more difficult to keep up their home. Ann has tried to introduce the idea of "other" living alternatives but her parents cut her off with the statement, "we will stay here until something happens and we have to move."

While offered as a reasonable solution, it is pure magical thinking. Ann's parents want to stay in their own home as long as possible, but any discussion about alternative living arrangements that involves leaving their home is emotionally overwhelming for them. The quickest way to get rid of this discomfort is to find a simple, magical solution. In the case of Ann's parents, it is "stay put until the bottom falls out."

The good news is that magical thinking works, if only momentarily. It allows Ann's parents to defer the unbearable complexity and emotional burden of sorting out living accommodations to an undefined future event. Unfortunately, this strategy comes with a severe surcharge: the unnecessary loss of long-term control.

By refusing to admit that a conversation about future living accommodations, though uncomfortable and complex, is necessary to maintain optimal long-term control, Ann's parents are betting their quality of life on a hope that things will simply fall into place when a major medical set back invades their lives. Now what?

Despite their persistent refusal to discuss the "what if" housing issue with Ann, she needs to find a way to break through this communication gridlock. One effective way is to create a "**When The Bottom Falls Out (TM)**" mind-map that visually represents their current "magical thinking" marching orders on a single sheet of paper. This diagram will help her show her parents the impact of "we don't want to talk about and will wait until things change before we plan" approach to long-term control. It will give Ann the opportunity to diagram the myriad of complex and unanswered questions that will surface when the "bottom" does fall out.



The "**When The Bottom Falls Out (TM)**" mind-map is a simple and effective reality check that affords Ann's parents a global overview of their choices and an opportunity to reconsider other options. If they hold firm to their magical thinking strategy, then Ann has less guilt about their decision. She did her best to reframe their choices in an effort to discuss other strategies, but was ultimately rebuffed.

But the good news is that in some cases a simple one-page diagram can be a change agent. It puts magical thinking solutions in a logical, non-judgmental context and exposes their limitations and untoward consequences. It also draws an important line in the caregiving sand for adult children. It says, "Here are my marching orders as I understand them" until further notice. Many times this is all that is needed for new conversations about non-magical options.

Best regards,
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