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Special needs, special guidance

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Advice for those working with clients who have a family member with disabilities.

Photos: Jean Pierre Tarabay

WHEN WE THINK OF CAREGIVING and the associated costs, the assumption might be an aging global population. But this type of care is not relegated to the elderly. The number of families with members who have special needs is substantial — 1 billion people, or 15% of the world's population, according to the World Bank — a sobering fact that carries with it significant costs, both long- and short-term.

Financial advisors, no matter where they are based, are increasingly likely to work with a family with a child or adult with special needs. **Naji A. Haddad**, an 11-year MDRT member from Beirut, Lebanon, has extensive experience working with such families. The statistics in Lebanon mirror those referenced above, with up to 15% of the Lebanese population living with physical, sensory, intellectual or mental disabilities.

"In Lebanon, we have around 900,000 cases, and I've met a lot of people who have such needs," Haddad said. "They

always inspire me to work with a deeper mission and more empathy. This also led me to believe more and more in the products that provide living benefits.”

When working with these families, Haddad realized he needed specific strategies to help support their circumstances. “The first step is showing empathy, yet not making them feel different,” he said, “and listening to the clients and their concerns.”

For that, Haddad urges support, which starts at a non-professional level. “We all could be part of this community sooner or later. Children with special needs are a blessing and need double efforts to protect them.”

Parents of children with disabilities are concerned about their future — where they will live, how they will spend money, who will take care of them — and Haddad said it’s important to address those concerns directly and early in the relationship. “Taking their concerns into consideration and trying to find potential solutions makes them feel that someone out there cares for them,” he said.

Those families need a lot of financial support to provide their children with proper care and education, something that is not readily available. “There is a lack of provisions for rights, resources and services for persons with disabilities in Lebanon, due foremost to inaction by the state,” Haddad said.

“It is shocking that their tuition is more than double. They need private tutors and private clinical therapies from different professionals. They get bullied a lot and have rare career opportunities.”

The surprise to me was the love and dedication these parents have with their children.

Haddad stresses the importance of creating a legal framework that protects your clients' rights, which vary by country. "In Lebanese culture, the law is often related to religion, and thus sometimes a child could be subject to unfair matters such as being taken care of by a relative who doesn't ensure their well-being," he said.

In such a case, Haddad might designate an NGO as a beneficiary and establish an agreement with that institution to ensure the needed benefits will be always available after collecting the insured sum.

And, since local laws do not always favor the concerns of his clients, he sometimes needs to find creative solutions. "In Lebanon, a mother, unfortunately, still can't give nationality to her children or be the main legal guardian," he said.

In one case, he designated his clients' parents as beneficiaries. He ensured that assets would be transferred to a new bank account with clear instruction to automatically transfer a specific sum every month to the wife's account.

While all client work brings with it unique challenges, it is the rewards of working with families with disabilities that have made a lasting impression on Haddad. "The surprise to me was the love and dedication these parents have with their children," he said. "Children with special needs are really

special and have a lot of potential.”

The focus should always be on the person, Haddad said. “Every financial advisor must have enough empathy and passion to support these families and give them double attention and triple servicing to make sure they are always pampered and on the right track financially.”

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