

Long Distance Caregiving Tips

Oftentimes, it is easier to deny the fact that our frail elderly parents may need extra care assistance than it is to admit their health may be declining. If you live at a distance, it becomes that much more important to have a plan in place for emergencies and care. Below are some helpful tips to assist in this endeavor.

Plan Ahead

Have family discussions about the “What ifs” regarding:

- Living situation preferences depending on severity and who is involved - play out some scenarios for discussion; for example, a fractured hip requiring rehab stay.
- How will you know when “it’s time” to make a change? What would this look like?
- Financial concerns in caregiving such as how much work can family members afford to miss? What outside financial assistance might be available?
- Advance Directives for decision making: make sure all is in order and keep a copy with you.

Collect Functional Information Along the Way

Regularly think about and assess how the elder is really doing. Assess nutrition and grocery shopping, cognition, socializing and getting out, substance use, pain control, depression, getting to doctors’ appointments – does anything here need attention and some external support?

- Identify the registered nurse working with your elder’s doctor and maintain communication with that person.
- Be sure there is a HIPAA Release of Information Form on file at all of your elder’s doctors’ offices so you can talk openly with the doctor, and keep one for yourself.
- Have regular telephone contact with your elders to check in and help them problem-solve.
- Maintain a list of the informal local resources: neighbors, church friends, other relatives who can be part of your elder’s support network. Maintain that network and let them know how to reach you and that you welcome their calls.
- Avoid overreacting or minimizing.
- Schedule visits regularly and plan ahead before you visit, setting some goals and appointments to concur with your visits.
- Take your elders out while visiting to see how they function in the community and with others.
- Assess the home safety each time you visit: lighting, locks, telephone access.
- Keep a fairly up-to-date telephone book /Yellow Pages for their area with you.

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Know When to Travel

- Is this a real medical or care crisis? As a part (not all) of your decision making, ask the physician, social worker, or nurse for information and his/her opinion on whether you should travel in.
- Assess what you can achieve while there and the consequences of not going.
- Can someone else locally take care of the issue at hand or eyeball the situation for you?
- Assess how this trip will affect your own personal situation: children/partner, finances, work & leave time.
- It's OK to go there just to put your mind at ease as well. If staying home and worrying is going to be less productive for you, then perhaps you should go.
- Have some cash available for emergency travel. Have an extra set of your elder's house and car keys with you and with a reliable neighbor of theirs.

Consider Using a Home Care Agency and/or a Geriatric Care Manager

Professionals with specialized training to:

- Assess the situation,
- Identify problems, gaps, strengths and resources,
- Monitor,
- Screen and arrange for other services and assistance,
- Coordinate with financial, legal and medical providers,
- Liaison to families, and
- Provide crisis intervention.

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