

Tips for Long-distance Caregivers

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Caring for someone long-distance can be just as stressful, or sometimes even more stressful, than being in the same location. Your initial reaction may be to minimize the distance, but first consider which is more stressful; providing and arranging for care from a distance, uprooting yourself to move to your relative's town to provide care or uprooting your family member from what is familiar to them (family, friends, town, home) in order to move them to where you are living.

Below are some tips to facilitate caregiving from a distance:

- Your aging parents may not always be forthright about their needs or declining health. If you have a support network in place with key contact people identified, you should be able to get a clearer picture of the real situation. Key contact people might include a close friend, a minister, a doctor or others who regularly visit your parent. They may be the first to notice a change in your relative's health or ability, so calling them directly can save you time and effort. Ask them to alert you if they notice changes in your family member's behavior, appearance, memory, mobility or food habits.
- Ask a member of this support system to check in with your family member on a regular basis. When you live at a distance there needs to be some person at the other end whom you feel comfortable phoning or who will agree to call you collect when problems arise. Keep the name and telephone number of the contact person with you at all times and ensure that they have your telephone number.
- Start a dialogue with your relative to discuss what her care choices might be further down the road. Explore services, resources and other avenues for care available in her community.
- You may need to hire someone to help with meals and personal care. Discuss with your family member what services they may need. If they express resistance, try to agree on at least one service and begin with that one.
- Pick up a copy of the local telephone directory and take it back home with you.
- Schedule regular visits. Plan in advance what you need to accomplish during this visit in addition to visiting with your relative. Be observant while you visiting. Are they eating regularly? Are the bills getting paid?
- In a non-emergency situation, try to step back and evaluate whether or not you really need to go or if you can send someone else in your place. Can someone take care of it locally? This will free you up for emergency situations or times when it is essential for you to be there.
- Make sure legal and financial affairs are in place and up-to-date. Find out who their lawyer is, where their bank is located and where they keep their important documents.

Above all, remember, you may not be able to do everything, but you will be able to do enough. Know that even the best caregivers feel a sense of guilt, believing that they could have done more.

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