

*Long Distance Caregiving*

By Diane Bamforth

It is estimated that there are over 7 million Americans acting as long distance caregivers for an elderly friend or family member. Long distance is anything from over an hour away to the other side of the country or even world.

It is important to have conversations with parents before they need intervention. Do they have an advance directive, a medical proxy and power of attorney? Preparing all these things well in advance makes the caregiver’s role easier when it is needed. Your loved one should makes these decisions for themselves and make their wishes known to family members.

When do you decide that it is time to step in and suggest extra help? It is all too easy for a loved one to tell you that all is well over the phone and often a short stay may not be enough to tell what is really happening. Try to make an extended visit during which time you can carefully assess their environment, correct dangerous situations and then plan to address other needs. Often we get sidetracked with the practicalities of a making a home safe and accessible, providing rails and ramps, bath aids and so on, but overlook the obvious.

 Observe carefully. If your parent is still driving have them take you on a short trip so you can assess their skills. Having a well-stocked pantry with staples that are not out of date is all very well but is your parent able to open and prepare food from cans? Can they see and turn the microwave or oven controls? Does the fridge have spoiled or out of date food? Can they read sell by dates?

Is the house well lit? Replace bulbs and smoke detector batteries, adjust hot water and heating thermostats, get the A/C serviced. Look for signs of clutter and hoarding. Is there unopened mail? Are bills piling up and remaining unpaid? Is laundry being done? Are medications being taken regularly? Can you determine their overall mood and health status? Sometimes this is not easy to assess in a short visit as they can put a brave face on their situation rather than worry you. Talk with neighbors; ask them to contact you if they are concerned.

There may be a sibling, another parent or paid caregiver providing day-to-day care but a fresh pair of eyes can detect changes in mood and abilities that can go unnoticed by those in daily contact. Please be gentle addressing these issues; don’t barge in and take charge as it can cause offence. Communication is the key.

Ask the caregiver what it is that they want from you. Make sure that you give them the emotional support they need and acknowledge their contribution. You might be able to take over their role whilst they have a break. Or perhaps you may play an entirely different role.

I find that I serve a totally different function to my mother’s usual caregivers when I visit. Firstly I plan my visit asking what she wants to achieve whilst I am there. I have time to spend with her that busy siblings do not. Just having company lifts her mood. I shop for the things she does not like to ask others for, such as toiletries and make up. I keep her stocked up with hearing aid batteries, greetings cards and postage stamps. We go clothes shopping or I do it online. When I am back in the US I order some medical supplies and keep her supplied with books from online UK shopping sites. These may seem insignificant when compared to the day-to-day issues associated with caring for someone who is frail and elderly, but they mean a lot and can be so often overlooked by those who are already overwhelmed with caring.

Arranging for the more routine medical appointments to be made for a time when you are visiting can be helpful to take pressure off regular caregivers and also give you more of an insight into your parent’s needs.

What role can you assume from afar? What are you good at? Perhaps you can organize finances, monitor health claims and pay bills, research health issues and communicate with professionals. Perhaps you can order groceries online. Can you help to find paid caregivers or residential and nursing homes and check out references? Many of these things are so much easier to accomplish from afar than they used to be.

Technology is also helpful in keeping in touch. If your loved one is able, you can Skype or Facetime. Set up a smart speaker and teach them how to ask it to keep track of the day, appointments and activities. Sync the device so that you can keep the information up to date.

It is even possible to monitor your parent’s movements remotely. Sensors can alert you to doors opening, the fridge and medication dispensers being accessed, even the bed being slept in. It may seem intrusive and it is expensive but for some families it provides peace of mind.

If finances allow, it is also possible to employ a Geriatric Care Manager to coordinate care. Make sure that you use Eldercare locator (a service of the Administration on aging) at [www.eldercare.gov](http://www.eldercare.gov) or go to [www.caremanager.org](http://www.caremanager.org) to find a professional care manager.

Even though you may be far away, caregiving can still take an emotional toll. It may not be as physically exhausting as if you were close by but it is usual to feel anxious. You may think that you are not doing enough, or have feelings of guilt that you cannot do more. Worry about taking time off work, being away from family, and the cost of travel can all add to your own stress. Sometimes there is resentment from a sibling who is left dealing with the day-to-day caregiving. Acknowledge that caregiving requires sacrifices and adjustments for everyone and provide them with support in whatever way you can. Talk with them about what you can do. You need to take care of yourself in just the same way as if you were close by and there are support groups both in real time and on line that cater for long distance caregivers. Tell yourself that you are doing the best that you can under the circumstances.

Bibliography: So Far Away *Twenty Questions and Answers about Long-Distance Caregiving.* Published bythe National Institute on Aging 2010.