

Long Distance Care

By Nan Hayes for Caring Transitions

Long Distance Caregiving is becoming a way of life for many adults. The fabric of our society has changed significantly over the past few years and we continue to experience exponential increases in populations over the age of 75. With thousands of “Baby Boomers” turning 60 every day, we are undeniably entering a time where more working adults will care for aging parents.

Family visits during the holiday season often drive this point home. A simple trip to mom and dad’s house may reveal that everything is not running as smoothly as it once was. The house may be in disarray, with unpaid bills scattered about, stale food in the refrigerator and expired medications on bathroom shelves. In other cases, parents may seem forgetful or otherwise impaired. By the first of the year, it may dawn on countless adult children that they have a new role in the family; that of “Caregiver,” and for many, this is uncharted territory.

The good news is, more resources are made available everyday to support family caregivers. Most experts agree on a few basic steps that will help adult children gain control of stressful family situations. We share those steps with you below.

Assess the Situation

Whether you discover your parents may be struggling with day to day home maintenance or serious medical issues, it is important to get a complete picture of their status. Don’t be afraid to ask parents questions about their health or the things they are struggling with at home. A last minute visit to their house often tells a much better story than a planned holiday visit, as issues may be more visible without the distraction of other relatives, holiday cheer and seasonal decorations. Try not to become patronizing, overreact or be overly critical if you discover unhealthy or unsafe living conditions. Take some time to first understand and more importantly, to listen to your parents and discover their concerns.

As you learn more about the situation, you should pay close attention to the three primary areas which typically require third-party professional assessment: 1. medical concerns, 2. cognitive concerns and, 3. an assessment of functional abilities or “[Activities of Daily Living](#)” (ADL’s). This last group includes items such as socialization, personal hygiene and the ability to prepare meals, take medications and manage finances.

Medical professionals, social workers and [Geriatric Care Managers](#) may be able to assist with these personal assessments.

Organize Information

Discuss the location of important medical, legal and financial documents with your parents and determine if they are willing to release copies of information to you. If they prefer to keep paperwork in the hands of legal or financial representatives, that is their prerogative. They may be willing to share names of individuals or institutions involved. At a minimum, you should possess or know the whereabouts of their date of birth, social security information and Medical Insurance information.

Your parents should be encouraged to assign Financial and Healthcare Powers of Attorney and complete or update Wills and Advanced Directives.

Gather Support

Long Distance Caregiving often involves a team approach. Your responsibility is to help those team members understand their roles and keep communications open. Resources will vary for every family, and may involve medical professionals, social services, care managers, home care providers, attorneys, financial advisors and more.

Additional support for your parents in the form of relatives, close friends, neighbors, religious leaders and other associates are equally as important. These individuals often become the people you rely on most for day to day updates and oversight for your parents. Obtain a copy of your parents' local phone book or personal address book if possible.

Establish a Plan

Discuss short and long term options with your parents based on the advice of professionals along with your parents' personal wishes. Once areas of necessary support have been identified, set up a schedule for communicating with local care givers and other family members to make sure things are progressing as planned. Be prepared for sudden changes in health or mental health status.

Consider all the options before moving your relative. While moving a parent closer may seem to be the best solution for you, in-home services may permit them to remain in their familiar home, which is preferred by most older adults. In the event of a move, professional services such as [Caring Transitions®](http://www.CaringTransitions.com) can coordinate all aspects of a relocation project, including planning for downsizing, movers, realtors, organizing, shipping, packing, estate sale and more.

Recognize Your Limitations

Frequent travel to visit parents can be stressful and creates difficult situations for jobs and immediate family. Be sure to budget your travel funds and set up a network of support through family, friends and child care services to help support your new role. Discuss your parents' situation with your supervisors and Human Resources department at the workplace so they may better accommodate changes in your schedule. Ask your spouse and children for personal or emotional support when it is needed.

Don't overlook signs of stress, which are quite common for care givers. Chronic fatigue, weight loss or gain, indecisiveness, sleeplessness and irritability are all symptoms of the stress you may be under. Give yourself a break by relying on your spouse, friends, family and professional resources. Be sure to eat healthy, exercise and maintain regular sleeping hours.

As our parents live longer, a whole new set of skills are required to support our families. Fortunately, technology, services and professional resources are developing at rapid pace to help support this new "Age of Care Giving."

We understand that any downsizing or de-cluttering project can be overwhelming. As the nation's largest professional resource for downsizing, de-cluttering and household liquidation, your Caring Transitions office provides a total solution for sorting, organizing, donations, shipments, packing, Estate Sale and Online Auction.

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