

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Long Distance Caregiving: Caring for Older Relatives from Across the Miles

It’s not uncommon in today’s world that family members live hundreds of miles apart. And as family members spread out farther away from one another, many adult children are coming face-to-face with the realities of long-distance caregiving for their older parents or relatives.

For these families, the distance between older relatives and adult children can create unique challenges in providing care. Long distance caregivers face the same emotional and financial concerns as those who live close by, but they can also carry additional feelings of guilt and anxiety at not being able to "be there" for loved ones.

However, caregiving can work across distances. The key is to plan ahead and be organized. Below are a few tips for long-distance caregivers to help make this challenge more manageable:

Involve relatives in the decision-making. It’s usually best for everyone if your relative actively participates in the development of a caregiving plan. Try openly discussing with your relative, what his or her needs are and how you can work together to ensure that these needs are met. Show respect and acknowledge his or her input and wishes as part of the plan. This will ensure that everyone is comfortable with the results.

Plan regular check-in times. Establish a routine for telephone calls, e-mails or other forms of communication. Having regular and consistent communication is important for both you and your relative. This is your opportunity to share, ask questions, and stay "in the loop" on what’s happening in your relative’s life.

Expect the unexpected. Plan ahead and take into account emergencies. Reserve vacation days should you need to travel on a moment’s notice, set extra funds aside for emergency home care services if needed, and have a directory of reliable providers and resources easily accessible to you. If you wait for a crisis and are forced into quick decisions, you will limit the options available to you.

Connect with local friends and neighbors. Create a list of people in your relative’s life who may be able to assist you. Keep their phone numbers and addresses updated on a regular basis and contact them periodically. These individuals can keep you informed, serve as an accessible and familiar resource for your relative and be an excellent point of contact for you in case of an emergency.

Keep track of important information. Make a list of where your relative keeps important papers such as his or her insurance policies, bank account numbers, investments, living will and power of attorney (for legal, financial, and health care purposes). It’s also beneficial to have a list of physicians that your relative is seeing, and any hospitals or clinics that are involved in his or her medical care. If you can, note any medications that your relative is taking (including frequency and dosage) and any allergies or other medical conditions he or she may suffer from.

Seek personal support. Caregiving can be difficult, especially from a distance, and some days things may not go as well as you had hoped. If you’re feeling overwhelmed, talk to someone—whether it‘s a close friend, a spouse, a support group, or a dependent care specialist—you can receive the help that you need to handle challenging situations. You can also find great comfort and strength in knowing that you are not alone.

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Long-distance caregiving can place increased strain on both your relationship with your loved one and your life. It's important that you remember to accept help from others and take time for yourself. Realize that it's impossible to fulfill all of your parent's needs and that the service and support you do provide, will go a long way in ensuring that your loved one gets the assistance they need.