



Care from Afar

Given the realities of modern day life, many caretakers find themselves far away from their elderly relatives who need help. This long-distance caring takes more work and a greater level of commitment than if you lived nearby, and it is not the ideal situation. Some preparation, however, can help to make long-distance care more feasible.

How Far Is Far?

You are generally considered a long-distance caregiver if you live more than an hour's drive from the person you care for. This can mean several different scenarios, however. You might live in New York and your aging mother lives in California. Or you might live in Cincinnati and she lives in Cleveland. Although both technically involve long-distance caring, the first case involves much more time, effort and expense than the second.

Day-to-Day Care

The daily care your aging relative needs can vary, and it can also become more complicated with age. At first, he or she may just need someone to help with incidental activities—paying bills, shoveling snow, light housekeeping. This kind

of help can be done by hired help, like an in-home assistant. Or, you can hire half-day care or just transportation services. When your relative needs more extensive help with required daily activities, like bathing, eating and walking, you might want to consider round-the-clock in-home care or a nursing home. As a long-distance caregiver, you can help to ensure that these daily needs are met, and try to talk regularly with those who are handling the day-to-day care. Care managers can plan and organize care activities.

Emergency Care

One of the keys to emergency care is that your relative has the ability to summon help when needed. This might include a beeper or other emergency alert system. Also, set up a system where someone—you, other siblings, friends, or neighbors—check in regularly with your relative to make sure things are alright.

If there is an emergency—a fall, an illness, an accident—have phone numbers for caretakers nearby so that you can mobilize them before you arrive. You will be surprised by how much you can do to help from far away. And be ready to leave at short notice if the situation warrants it.

THE CHALLENGES OF LONG-DISTANCE CARE

COMMUNICATION: Try to keep communication as clear as possible; ask for specific information, and keep records of it. Avoid emotional discussions in favor of rational, logical and factual ones.

GUILT & BLAME: Difficult as it may be, try to avoid guilt and blame. It only gets in the way of truly helping your loved one and his or her caregivers. If others blame you for not being there, ignore them. Don't blame others for the care they do or don't give.

EXPENSES: Have enough money set aside to cover all emergency travel expenses, including airfare, car rental, food and incidental cash.

TIME: When you don't live near your aging relative, each visit will take more time than it would if you could just drop in. You will need to have a job that is flexible enough to give you time to go when you need to.

CHILD CARE: Have back-up child care lined up ahead of time so that if you need to go, you can.