Caregiving at a distance

As the oldest of four children—and the only physician—I often find myself on the phone trying to figure out the best way to help my parents, who are hours away, when they’re sick. On one family vacation in Florida, it meant heading back to the airport before I had even unpacked. On another, I had to arrange to get my father to a hospital with specialized services. But most of the time, it has simply involved making sure that medical decisions are sound and recommendations are followed. I’m fortunate that their illnesses have so far been short-lived and that they’re still able to care for themselves. But for many, it’s a daily juggle. It’s estimated that up to 7 million people in the U.S. help care for an older relative long distance, a number expected to double in the next 15 years as the elderly population grows.

If you’re the designated caregiver in your family and you live more than an hour away, here are some things you can do to prepare for the next crisis (and there will be one).

Maintain a care notebook. I keep a file of my parents’ medical records, which includes test results, current medication, allergies, insurance coverage, and Social Security numbers, along with their physicians’ contact information. I have also collected e-mail addresses and phone numbers for neighbors and close friends, as well as the phone number for the nearest hospital.

Develop a relationship with your parent’s doctors. I appreciate the input when adult daughters or sons accompany their parents to office visits—even more when they arrive with current medication lists and knowledge of medical issues. That’s why I always try to introduce myself to my parents’ doctors, either in person or over the phone, and ask to be kept informed of any important medical issues that arise. If possible, schedule your parents’ appointments while you’re visiting. To avoid future frustration, ask your parents to sign privacy releases giving your doctors authorization to speak with you by phone regarding their care.

Find a local senior or geriatric care manager. They’re usually trained in gerontology, social work, nursing, or psychology, and can identify problems and help provide solutions that you might not be aware of. They can also screen, place, and monitor in-home help, and arrange for short- or long-term assistance for long-distance caregivers. The National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers, at www.caremanager.org, provides lists of certified GCMs. A consultation costs about $80 to $250 an hour.

Set up an alert system. If your parent lives alone, talk with him or her about an electronic alert system for emergencies. These systems, typically lightweight devices worn around the neck or wrist, require only a push of a button to generate an automatic call to summon emergency help. You might also want to arrange a daily check-in call or e-mail message.

Don’t go it alone. If you have siblings, try to split doctors’ visits, financial costs, and other responsibilities with them as much as possible. Make a list of family, friends, and neighbors who are willing to help with transportation and home visits. Check into senior day care or recreational programs available through local governments or nonprofit groups. Also investigate the availability of meal-delivery programs and transportation services. If such services together still don’t provide the supervision your parent needs, ask people at the sponsoring organizations if they know someone willing to move in, perhaps in exchange for room and board or a small stipend. (Be sure to check references carefully.)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
- Caring From a Distance (www.cfad.org; 202-895-9465).
- Family Caregiver Alliance (www.caregiver.org; 800-445-8106).
- The National Family Caregivers Association (www.nfcacares.org; 800-896-3650).
- The National Respite Network (www.archrespite.org; 703-256-2084).
- AARP (www.aarp.org/families/caregiving; 888-687-2277).

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