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7 Tips for Long-Distance Caregiving

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If you live far away from a loved one who needs care, you can still get him the help he needs. The key is knowing where to turn for support. These tips can keep you connected and involved.

No. 1. Get Local Help

Even if your loved one doesn't need regular medical help, it's still a good idea to have someone stop by and check on him occasionally. If he doesn't have friends, family, or neighbors who are able to do this, look into online resources like AARP, Lotsa Helping Hands, or the National Association for Professional Geriatric Care Managers.

These sites can help you find health care workers and caregiving professionals by city and state.

"You can hire a full-time care manager, or you can just say, 'I need someone to go to my parents' house 3 days a week and make sure they get showers,'" says Sara L. Douglas, PhD, RN, assistant dean for research at the Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing at Case Western Reserve University.

No. 2. Get Feedback From Others

Your loved one's friends and neighbors, or hired help, can be your eyes and ears. They can give you reports on how he's doing if he's reluctant to tell you himself.

"Parents often want to shield their children from bad news, so they'll say they're fine when in fact that may not be the whole story," Douglas says.

Visitors to your loved one's home can let you know if he's got enough food in the fridge, gets his basic household chores done, and if his appearance and overall health are still the same.

No. 3. Decide What's Important

"Distance caregivers tend to worry about everything from A to Z," says John Schall, CEO of the nonprofit Caregiver Action Network. "They worry their loved ones aren't eating, aren't taking their meds, are tripping on rugs, are letting bills pile up -- but usually it's not A to Z. Maybe it's just A, C, and F."

To help you decide where to focus your time and energy, ask your loved one to do an "independent living assessment." He'll answer a series of questions developed by Boston University researchers. It can help you figure out which areas and skills your loved one needs help with.

"Otherwise, you'll worry too much and you might start to think that maybe a nursing home is your only option," Schall says. "A mistake we see people make far too often is thinking that it's got to be all or nothing."

No. 4. Make Technology Your Friend

Introduce your loved one to technology that helps you stay connected, like FaceTime or Skype. When you chat face to face through programs like those, you'll be able to see his living space in the background. It can alert you to potential problems you may not notice over a voice-only call.

If you're worried that he isn't taking some of his daily meds, look for apps that can help you both keep track.

Talk with your loved one's doctors about how you can stay in touch with them. Maybe they can put you on speakerphone for important appointments, or give you access (with your loved one's permission) to online medical records.

No. 5. Keep a Paper File

When you visit your loved one, make photocopies of all important medical documents and insurance paperwork, so you can relay information over the phone or fax if needed. Also collect contact information for financial advisors, attorneys, and doctors.

Talk to your loved one about whether he wants a living will. This document instructs doctors about how to care for him if he can no longer communicate.

Also discuss whether you should get legal documents that let you be his "financial power of attorney" and "health care proxy." That way you can make money and medical decisions for him if he can't make them on his own. You'll need the advice of a lawyer to arrange this.

No. 6. Ask the Right Questions

When you talk with your loved one over the phone, ask him if he's been taking his medication and whether he's tripped and fallen lately. But to keep from getting into a routine where he answers automatically without thinking, you should ask in different ways.

"You can ask every day, 'Did you take your pills?' But every couple of weeks, throw a curveball and say, 'Hey Mom, how many pills are left in that bottle?'" Schall says. "That way you're giving her a reminder that she needs a refill soon, but you also may get a better sense of whether she's really taking them."

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No. 7. Pace Yourself

Make sure you don't run yourself ragged when you're in charge of long-distance caregiving.

"It's important to realize this is often a long-term relationship, and you can't fix everything," Douglas says. "Do the best you can, don't feel guilty about living far away, and don't hesitate to reach out for help -- support groups, other family members, and online resources -- when you need it."