

Long-Distance Caregivers

If you have found yourself in the position of being a long-distance caregiver for someone in your family, don't feel alone. Many people in our community have found themselves in the same situation. The following are some ideas from the:

[Handbook for Long-Distance Caregivers](#) by Bob Rosenblatt and Carol Van Steenberg.

The Journey begins.... It is the long-dreaded phone call. Your mother lives 1,000 miles away, and some problems have developed. You say, "I'll be there as soon as I can book a flight." Suddenly, you're playing a new role. You're now what the professionals in the aging field call a "long-distance caregiver."

When you first enter the unfamiliar world of long-distance caregiving, you may not see the personal rewards ahead. But they're there, along with very real challenges. You may be the main person who oversees your loved one's care, or you may be a mainstay for someone else, perhaps a sibling. Either way, you'll play a key role on a caregiving team that supports your loved one in being as independent as possible.

You can expect your caregiving role to include two key functions: Information Gatherer (using websites and other resources) and Coordinator of Services. Community agencies may exist to help you and your family handle the challenges. Your job is to find out about these resources and put the pieces together in a way that's most effective for your family.

There's no one right way to be a caregiver; there are many possibilities. Think of it as a journey. Take it step by step. Spending time at the beginning to understand your situation and your options will serve you better than rushing into action without a plan. A team approach is key to success. Conditions change along the way and your strategies will have to shift accordingly. Be sure to get the support you need and take care of yourself along the way.

It will help you immeasurably if, before there is a crisis, your parent provides you with information to locate his or her records, important telephone contacts and other essential items.

Legal documents, such as Durable Powers of Attorney and Advance Directives, can and should be prepared before a medical condition makes it impossible to do so. To get help you can go on the Internet and type in "long-distance caregiving" and you will get quite a list.

First and foremost, get a complete medical diagnosis for physical or cognitive problems. You will want to find out what your relative can do independently--what can be done with a little help and what your loved one cannot do at all right now. Make a checklist of all that will need to be done. Be sure to introduce yourself to your family member's doctor and any others engaged in providing care.

Who's on your team? You live far away. Ask yourself, "Who is in regular contact with my loved one? Possibilities include: Nearby siblings or family members and close friends; neighbors who know your relative well, people your loved one sees frequently, such as clergy or a housekeeper who comes often; or professionals with longstanding relationships. Compile a list of names, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses for these people. Leave spaces for case managers, social workers or other professionals who can help you navigate the care system.

As you see the kind of help your relative needs today--what he or she can, or cannot do independently--you'll be in a better position to understand how the local community can support the two of you. Remember, whenever possible, to make these decisions in agreement with your loved one.

Services in your community may include: Meal delivery, adult day care, in-home aides, transportation, help with Medicare claims, support groups, volunteers, financial assistance. Learning about the formal system in the local community will take some effort. There are good tools available to help you.

The Administration on Aging's [Eldercare Locator](#) is useful in finding aging services in your loved one's community. You may reach the Eldercare Locator via telephone at (800) 677-1116. (I just tried the phone number and

got a real live person immediately!). They will provide contact information for every Area Agency on Aging in the country.

FAMILY CAREGIVER ALLIANCE'S will connect you to an information specialist who can offer advice on local services. Or e-mail infor@caregiver.org.

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON AGING [Benefits Check Up](#) will help you find out whether your relative qualifies for state and federal assistance programs.