

Caregiving at a Distance

Summer is often the time when families pack up and journey across the miles to visit relatives. What they find may be a cause for concern if their family member has had a change in health. Faced with this situation, they may not know where to begin or where to turn for help. In this and the next 5 columns we will explore some ideas that may prove helpful.

“Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city.” (George Burns). This may be true if everyone is healthy, but what if your loved one is ailing and you live several hundred miles away? You likely have feelings of helplessness and guilt because distance makes it difficult to check on their well-being? You, like many others are faced with **long distance caregiving**.

There are many difficult questions and issues to address when your loved one is frail, ill, or elderly. Although you realize that you can't travel back and forth to provide care, you may still feel a tremendous amount of guilt over not being there to help. You probably aren't familiar with the services available in your relative's area and might feel overwhelmed by the thought of having to identify community resources. Here are some ideas to help you cope.

Making the most of limited visits: Commuting back and forth is strenuous and for anyone – even those not involved with caregiving. Those who are responsible for a relative may also experience financial strain, job stress and feelings of guilt and anxiety. You will want to make the most of your time together when you visit.

Talk with your relative so that the two of you can go about solving problems or preventing them from happening. Allow yourself some extra time to visit home care agencies or call on neighbours, friends or other family members who form your informal support network.

Be careful to involve your relative. Talk honestly about their ability to remain in their current situation and the supports that are needed. You and your relative's perception of the situation may differ greatly. You may think that he or she is unable to perform certain tasks when all that is needed is more time to complete the task. Remember that a person may be willing to sacrifice a great deal to remain in his or her own home.

If your relative is still able to remain independent, you might want to establish a back-up plan of support in case needs change in the near future. While you are visiting, be observant. Do you notice anything unusual? Is your relative eating nutritiously? Does he or she have contact with others? Are finances being handled appropriately? Are there obvious safety problems? Answers to these questions will give you an indication of the older person's well-being. If you don't feel that you have adequate time to evaluate the situation, or if your relative is experiencing confusions, you may want to talk with other family members, neighbours, friends, family doctor, home care agencies or clergy to get their opinion of the situation. (Ideas for this series from several sources including: *Miles Away and Still Caring: A Guide for Long-Distance Caregivers* by American Association of Retired Persons and *Long Distance Caregiving* by Alzheimer Society of Canada.) More problem solving ideas in next week's column.