

SO FAR AWAY

Long-distance caregiving strategies for your elderly parents

BY REBECCA KUZINS



AFTER LIVING WITH MY 90-YEAR-OLD MOTHER FOR THREE YEARS, I HAVE PERSONALLY EXPERIENCED SOME OF THE DIFFICULTIES OF CARING FOR AN AGING PARENT. BUT WHILE IT WAS PAINFUL TO WATCH MY MOM'S PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH DECLINE, I WAS ABLE TO TAKE HER TO THE DOCTOR, PAY HER BILLS AND MAKE SURE SHE HAD UPDATED POWER-OF-ATTORNEY AND ADVANCED HEALTH-CARE DIRECTIVE DOCUMENTS.

Caregiving can be a lot tougher for adult children whose parents live far away. The National Institute on Aging estimates that about 7 million Americans are long-distance caregivers. For these people, caregiving can be a time-consuming and expensive process, resulting in lost work days and high travel costs. In a 2007 survey conducted by the National Alliance for Caregiving and the United Health Group, long-distance caregivers' annual expenses averaged \$8,728, far more than those of children who lived near their parents.

Despite these obstacles, there are some things long-distance caregivers can do to make their task easier. The first step is to thoroughly assess your parents' needs so you can devise a caregiving plan and have all the information you need on hand in case of an emergency.

Jane Wolf Waterman, a Beverly Hills psychotherapist, realized her 85-year-old parents needed help when she made a Christmas visit to their New York home. This experience led her to found Parenting Our Parents, an online community to assist caregivers, and to write her book, *Oh My God! We're Parenting Our Parents*. Waterman advises caregivers to learn everything they can about their parents' physical and mental health, financial condition and estate planning by speaking with their doctors, lawyers, accountants, friends, neighbors and other people who are regularly in contact with them.

You should also ask your parents to assess their own condition and how they want to be cared for — provided they are able to hold this discussion with you. “It is important to have this conversation early — not when they are in the back of an ambulance,” says Brenda Shorkend, who runs an eldercare management company in Pasadena. “They need to be healthy and cognitively with it.”

Caregivers should compile the following information:

Health: Keep a list of all your parents' doctors with contact information. You will also need a list of the medications your parents take, the doses, who prescribed these drugs, the times for medication and the pharmacy's name and phone number. In addition, find out if your parents are receiving Medicare or other types of health insurance.

Wayne April, a Pasadena-based geriatric-care manager and social worker, advises caregivers to “make sure your parents get regular care through their primary doctor. A lot of them don't.”

“If you are very worried about living far away, you can always phone your parent's doctor or speak to their nurse,” says Shorkend. “You can say, ‘I'm really concerned about something. Can you please invite my mom for an appointment to discuss this with her or discuss it with her at her next appointment?’”

Financial: Long-distance caregivers must also determine their parents' financial condition. Can they afford the costs of an in-home caregiver or an assisted-living facility or nursing home? Do they have long-term-care insurance to help cover their expenses? Can they write checks and pay their own bills?

If the answer to the latter question is no, you can pay their bills by adding your name to their checking account. You can also consolidate bank and investment accounts to simplify



Beverly Hills psychotherapist Jane Wolf Waterman

—continued on page 23

your money management.

Legal: Make sure you have an up-to-date power-of-attorney form and an advanced health-care directive. The first document enables you to handle your parents' financial affairs; the second authorizes you to make health-care decisions for your parents when they are incapacitated. If you need assistance to obtain or update these documents, hire an attorney who practices in the state in which your parents live.

"Each state is different and you should at least know who your parents' attorney is," explains Alexandra Smyser, an estate-planning specialist at the Pasadena law offices of Donald P. Schweitzer. In addition, she says, "It is always good to know if the elder has a trust or a will. Some older people are very private, even among family members. But if you know where there's a copy of a trust or a will, it is very helpful."

If there is a trust, Shorkend says caregivers should make sure there is a successor trustee who can represent your parents if they are unable to manage their own affairs. "It can be very difficult and expensive to bring in an attorney," she adds. "If the family is far away and can't be involved, they can appoint a professional licensed fiduciary who is near their parents."

Another strategy for providing long-distance care is to seek help from people and institutions in your parents' community. "The local senior center is a good place to start," says Shorkend. "It can refer you to other sources of help."

Online help is also available. The Eldercare Locator (eldercare.gov), created by the U.S. Administration on Aging, enables users to find local resources for adult day programs, caregivers, financial assistance, food and nutrition, health insurance, legal issues and other services.



BenefitsCheckUp (benefitscheckup.org), managed by the National Council on Aging, provides information about state and local benefits that can help seniors pay for medication, healthcare, food, housing and other expenses.

You can also hire a certified Aging Life Care professional near your parents to supervise their care in your absence. These geriatric-care managers can assess a senior's condition and devise a plan for providing needed assistance. The Aging Life Care Association's website (aginglifecare.org) lists people who have been certified or are in the process of being certified to perform these duties. Lorraine Cummings, principal of Cummings Care Management in Sierra Madre and Montrose, says Aging Life Care managers can "match a caregiver to a client, make sure the doctor knows the reality of a case, get the right medication" and perform a number of other duties. "It's somebody being there, being the eyes and ears, who can give the family peace of mind and streamline the care," she adds.

During his assessments of seniors, geriatric-care manager April says he looks at their "functionality and living environment. I give them little medical tests. I also get information about their medical providers and social support system. I serve as the overall supervisor. Once a month I visit to see if everything is all right."

Even though a geriatric-care manager can relieve you from performing many long-distance caregiving tasks, you should still continue to see your parents on a regular basis. "If you speak to them on the phone, they might sound fine," says Shorkend, "but you must actually be there, asking the right questions."

Many adult children use Skype or other devices that allow them to see their parents while speaking with them. However, Smyser says, many seniors are not "computer savvy and can't use Skype." If possible, she adds, "you can get them up and running on a laptop, where you can see each other. This expands their mind and challenges them."

But these technologies are no substitute for regular visits. "You should visit your parents at least once a year," maintains April. "If you don't eyeball the situation, you can't really know what's going on. There can be severe neglect or severe fraud."

Shorkend maintains that "polite snooping" is essential to determining your parents' condition. "When you visit, make sure you go inside the house. Look to see if it is safe and clean and if it looks better or worse than the last time you were there. See how they drive, if they are still driving, and determine if it's time for them to get off the road." ■■■

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