

LONG DISTANCE CAREGIVING

Thousands of family members provide long distance caregiving. That is, they provide support to an aging parent who lives at least an hour away.

I was often asked, “What can we do when our parents live so far away?” Living at a distance presents several challenges. When you visit your parents for short periods and probably at special occasions, you may not be aware of how they are managing their day-to-day lives.

Can they still do the everyday household chores? What about seasonal demands of yard work, snow removal, and regular upkeep? With increasing age and frailty, are they living safely, particularly if still in their home? See our companion article: [Do My Aging Parents Need Help?](https://youragingparents.ca/aging-parents-need-help)
<https://youragingparents.ca/aging-parents-need-help>

Here are a few suggestions to consider when your parents are still managing well.

- Use technology: email, video calling, texting. Today, 80% of seniors report using a computer. Some examples are SKYPE, FACETIME, WHATSAPP
- Offer to pay for these services as a gift.
- Set aside time on one of your visits to make a list of important documents and their location (wills, advanced directives, power of attorney). Make a list of important contacts, such as family physician, and other regular health care providers.
- During one of your visits, get to know your parents’ community – from their perspective. Who are their neighbours? Will they respond in time of need and will they give you their contact information? Will they take your phone number and call you if they have concerns?
- Over time, talk about services such as gardening and yard care, household maintenance, housekeeping, and transportation.

How to help as parents needs increase

As your parents’ needs increase, here are some other ways that you can play a crucial role in supporting Mom or Dad, at a distance:

- Show them or help them to do banking online
- Keep paperwork up-to-date in case of emergency.
See our Just-in-time Planning Guide.
<https://youragingparents.ca/activities>

- Develop a private family website to share photos and family stories and provide updates. It is helpful to the primary caregivers. You might also discover that family/friends offer to help when they read the updates.

I set up and wrote updates on a website to keep family and friends up to date. My family appreciated this because so many people were frequently contacting them.

- Reach out to friends and other communities: bridge club, church group. Make specific requests for them to be helpful.

We talked to one of Dad's friends. He agreed to take Dad for a drive once a week. This was a break for Mom.

- Reach agreements with your parents and help them to find appropriate services. In small communities, you may have to reach out to friends. In larger towns and cities, you will find services offered by private companies and by volunteers.
 - Find the nearest senior centre. Most of these organizations have directories of services for seniors on-line and in print.
 - Check with seniors' information services in the province or territory. A list of contacts is available in our article. Seniors Information Services
<https://youragingparents.ca/seniors-information-services>
- Talk about home security options.
- Look at ways to make the home safer: remove area rugs or secure with double-faced tape, reduce clutter, add nightlights.
- Talk about home modifications, such as accessible tubs, handrails, raised toilet seats, grab bars, or ramps.
 - Take photos of the home - very useful to send for quotes for modifications or for consultation with an occupational therapist.
- Explore the use of a medical alert system.
Read How to Choose a Medical Alert System from Consumer Reports. Visit <https://www.consumerreports.org> and search "How to choose a medical alert system"
- Talk about moving into assisted living or supportive housing. This is usually a very difficult conversation. If you are facing this -- you may find some of our articles are helpful. Found on our website: <https://youragingparents.ca/articles>
 - Tough Conversations with Aging Parents & Families
 - Talking with Aging Parents: Cooperation or Conflict?
 - SMART Conversations

What to do when the crisis happens

The earlier suggestions are not enough when health or medical crises occur. Then you feel the pull of trying to be in two places at the same time. Here's our best advice: try to recruit help, both personal and professional, to assist you at this time.

What kind of help is available? Financial resources will influence some of these suggestions. Consider the following ideas.

If your parents remain at home:

- Inquire about public health care services such as home care, companion programs, and personal care programs. Be sure that your parent is receiving the services that are available.
- Check out respite services, provided in the home or in a seniors housing facilities.

If your parent is in hospital or in a long-term care centre:

- On a visit, meet the care providers, particularly, the physician, the nurse in charge, and the interdisciplinary team (i.e. physiotherapist, social worker, dietitian). Get their contact information, including email, and provide yours so that you can keep in touch even at a distance.
- If you do not have a family member living nearby to assume the primary caregiving role, ask your parent for permission to be included in care planning. You can be consulted and advised -- even at a distance.

Want to know more about the roles of the professionals on the health care team? Read: Who's Who on the Health Care Team <https://youragingparents.ca/health-care-team>

How to support family members when you are the daughter/son from "away."

How can you be supportive when your family members are the ones living near your parents?

Family relationships and personal choice will, in part, determine how you provide support to your parents. Proximity will also determine how you do this. If you live a long distance from your parents, your role will be more challenging. In addition, financial resources will dictate the frequency and/or length of your visits.

1. Offer to help

Family members may not tell you about health issues or challenges because they don't want to worry you. Explain that you'll worry more if they're not honest with you. Reassure them that your aim is not to interfere, but to support them the best way you can. Ask for their ideas on how you can help.

Everyone agreed that Mom needed more stimulation and enjoyment. One thing I could do was to sort through music and make CDs of her favourite songs. She played the music every day.

An idea that I came up with was to make small photo albums, using Mom and Dad's photos. When friends came to visit, these albums were enjoyed by everyone and provided topics for conversation and reminiscing.

2. Offer respite

Relieving family so they can go on holidays or have a break is a true gift.

3. Offer financial support, if possible.

Your money could help pay for services or cover some out-of-pocket expenses for your family.

4. Do research

You can learn a lot to share with your family. What you need to know will depend on your situation; for example:

- medical condition: diagnosis, treatment and recovery
- convalescent or rehab programs in the community
- home modifications and costs (e.g., accessible tubs/showers, grab bars, stairlifts)
- housing options; retirement homes, assisted living
- financial assistance for home adaptations/renovations and purchase of aids to daily living. This can take a lot of time because some programs are offered by the local health authority and others are provincial benefit programs. To learn about tax deductions, you will have to consult CRA.

It was so helpful that my sister researched programs and services for me. I did not have the time or energy to do it.

Primary Caregiver

5. Trust your family's reports

If Dad seemed his usual self while you were visiting over the holidays, you may feel the person who lives nearby is exaggerating in their updates. This may not be the case – in particular, those with dementia will often appear more capable when visitors are around.

Not trusting the report can be a major source of conflict between yourself and those who are living with or near the parents.

We made videos of my mom to share with family members to show her functional abilities/limitations. It's much easier to watch a video and understand the issues versus reading a description.

Long distance Caregiver

6. Understand the reasons behind a decision

You may have concerns regarding a decision that has been made. Before you react, find out more. Those involved in day-to-day caregiving know the current situation, and usually have your parent's best interests at heart.

Take care of yourself

Helping a parent who lives at a distance can take its toll. But planning and discussion can help you to be supportive without wearing yourself out.

There are caregiver services that can be helpful. Check our directory: Caregiver Information and Support <https://youragingparents.ca/caregiver-information-and-support>

Take care of yourself! No doubt, you have heard this before and that is because it is extremely important advice. You need to attend to your own physical, emotional and mental health needs and this might mean that you cannot always do what others expect or what you demand of yourself! When called upon to support an ailing parent, you do not know the timeline involved: the demands might go on for many months. You need to pace yourself or risk burning out.

*We acknowledge the contributions of
Helen Buie and Val Carter for sharing their experiences and insights.*

Follow us
@youragingparents



Updated 2020

You have permission to copy this article for personal use and to share with others.

Source: Maureen Osis, Judy Worrell, & Dianne McDermid. *Your Aging Parents: How to Prepare. How to Cope*. 2nd ed. 2010. ElderWise Publishing. youragingparents.ca

Questions? Contact us: info@youragingparents.ca