

Long Distance Caregiving

Planning for the "What-if" Questions

If you live a distance from your parent and he is not in crisis, now is a good time to encourage planning. Start a dialogue with your parent to discuss what his care choices might be further down the road. Explore services, resources and other avenues for care available in his community so you will know where to turn should your parent's care needs change. Open your discussion with what-if questions:

What if there's a change in your health?

What if your medical condition changes and you need some assistance with housework or shopping?

What if you decide the house is too big and you can't take care of it?

What if you are incapacitated and need intensive care?

What if you need to move to another type of housing where others can assist with your care?

Who, if Anyone, Relocates?

Your first reaction to long distance caregiving may be to minimize the distance between you and your parent either by moving to his area or relocating him to yours. In some cases, relocating may be the best approach but quite often it is not. Having your parent close by may make it easier for you to co-ordinate and monitor his care. However, it can be disrupting for your parent to leave friends, home and a way of life that he is familiar and comfortable with. If you and your parent are contemplating a move, consider the following:

Will the move change medical insurance, retirement benefits, income and estate benefit structures?

What type of housing and skilled facilities are available in your area and your parent's?

What services, resources and support networks are available in your area and your parent's?

What kind of medical care is available in your area and your parent's?

What would your parent expect of you if you lived close by?

One problem you will face as a long-distance caregiver is determining what is going on with your parent. An aging parent may not always be forthright with the truth about their declining health and frailty. He may be too proud or embarrassed or feel he will worry you or be a burden to his family. If you have a support network in place with key contact people identified, you should be able to get a clearer picture of the real situation.

Key contact people might include a family member, a close friend, a neighbor, a nurse, a therapist, a doctor or others who regularly visit your parent or provide vital services. They will often be the first to notice a change in your parent. They will be the first to notice something is wrong, so calling them directly (or having them call you collect) can save you time and effort. Ask them to alert you if they notice changes in your parent's behavior, appearance, attitude, memory, mobility, diet or food habits. Keep a list of their phone numbers, addresses and when they should be contacted.

Questions to ask Your Parent's Key Contacts:

When was the last time they saw your parent?

What were their impressions at that time?

Do they have any concerns about your parents? Discuss any concerns that you or your parent may have.

Do they have any suggestions to better assist your parent?

If they are involved in some aspect of your parents care (such as sharing a meal, weekly, visits, etc.) are they still able to continue? How do they feel about this involvement?

Travel: Knowing When to Go

Clearly, you will need to visit your parent immediately if a medical crisis arises, if a health professional requests your presence, if your key contacts report a sharp decline in physical or mental status, an accident occurs such as a car accident or a fall that results in serious injury, or if those assisting your parent tell you that he has several unmet needs that jeopardize his health or safety. In a non-emergency situation, try to step back and evaluate

whether or not you really need to go or if you can send someone in your place.

Questions to Ask Before You Travel

Can someone take care of it locally?

Can you rely on your informal network to take care of the situation?

Can you financially afford the trip?

How much money would you save on traveling expenses by delaying your trip for a couple of weeks?

Can you afford to travel and still meet your financial obligations at home?

Do you have leave time available at work? If not, can you afford to take time without pay?

Do you need to make arrangements to have work completed in your absence?

Do you need to make special arrangements for your children or spouse?

Do you need to complete certain business transactions before your trip such as transferring money and paying bills?

Do you anticipate having to visit your parent again in the near future? If so, can you comfortably make two trips within a short period of time?

What would be the consequences of not visiting right now?