

Long-Distance Caregiving

1st November 2020

Taking care of an older relative or dependent adult can be challenging when you live in the same home or community. It can be that much more difficult when you live far away, especially if your relative has a health problem or difficulty coping with tasks that you might be able to help with if you lived nearby.

Stay in touch

Staying in touch can help you and your older relative feel connected and help ensure that your relative gets good care.

Call regularly. You might agree to call on the same day every week so your relative can look forward to speaking to you. Call more often if your relative is going through a difficult time—frequent, short conversations are usually more reassuring than occasional long conversations. Regular calls will also give you a sense of how much your relative's condition has changed from one week to the next. If you cannot call on a regular basis, there are agencies that can help check-in when you are not available.

There are many alternate ways to stay in touch. Using the telephone may be hard for someone who has trouble hearing or speaking. Write notes (using large letters if eyesight is an issue) and supplement them with email and digital photos if these are an option for both of you. You might enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope when you write to encourage your loved one to write back. Have video chats using FaceTime or Skype. Find out if your relative is open to staying in touch via Facebook. Many older adults struggle to understand social media, so be patient and use what is most convenient and helpful for them.

Make the most of visits

When you visit your relative, try to:

Plan what you want to accomplish before the visit. Talk with your relative and other family members. Be sure to consider their wishes. Plan ahead if you need to look for community resources or services while in town.

Before you arrive, let your relative know about any sensitive subjects you want to

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discuss. Try not to spring things on them.

Choose a time and place where you can talk with your relative without distraction or interruption.

Make time for fun. If you have stressful subjects to talk about, also doing something you both enjoy can create a more relaxed atmosphere. Plan to go shopping, to the movies, or ask your relative for ideas and arrange to do it together.

Carve out free time for yourself. You may want some time to see friends or other family members. Just be sure to let your relative know this and plan in advance.

Spend as much time as you can at your relative's home. Spend plenty of time outside if the weather is nice.

Stay in touch with your relative. You may have different feelings after you return home, or your relative may have reconsidered the suggestions you made. You may both have ideas that you want to share. Keep talking.

Check for safety

Visiting your older relative is a good time to check for safety issues.

Have the heating, plumbing, and electrical systems checked. Write down any needed repairs. Make a list of people you can call for repairs, and ask if they would respond to a call from a family member. Be sure that you use licensed and bonded contractors.

Check each room for safety with your relative. Consider removing throw rugs that could cause a fall, installing grab bars near the tub and toilet, and replacing standard toilet seats with raised toilet seats. Check that the hallways and bathroom have nightlights. Make sure your relative's phone has numbers large enough and buttons that can be pressed easily, especially if arthritis or any other condition is affecting mobility. Add contact numbers of nearby family, neighbours, police, and fire department.

Look at the exterior entrances. Do the steps to your relative's home need safety treads,

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handrails, or ramps? Is the entrance well lit? Could your relative use an electric garage door opener? Do all the window locks work? Find out if your relative could use help with tasks such as mowing the lawn or shovelling snow, and if so, try to arrange for someone to do them.

If your relative has a car, go for a drive together. Make sure that the car runs smoothly, that seats and mirrors are adjusted for your relative's height, and that safety features work properly. Assess your relative's driving skills, and see whether they still have the mobility and flexibility to respond quickly on the road.