

CAREGIVING AT A DISTANCE

By Judith S. Parnes, L.C.S.W., C.M.C

With modern medicine leading to longer life expectancy, including increasing time with incapacity, more family members than ever are becoming caregivers for their aging parents. It is a role, much like parenthood, that does not come with instructions. Good hearted and well-meaning adult children are managing in some cases, but not quite doing so well in others. Everyone today knows someone who is presently involved in caring for an elderly family member. Understanding the choices and the decisions that need to be faced when an elderly relative appears to need support is a daunting and often confusing task with few guidelines. Turning to professional geriatric care managers who specialize in elder care planning, problem solving and long-term care alternatives can help assist with the transitions necessary.

The cost of long-term care undoubtedly affects how adult children will intervene on behalf of their parents. With Medicaid being the primary method of paying for care on a daily basis in the United States, there remain strict asset and income tests for qualifying. Understanding how to access public entitlements and assure that advance care planning is in place ahead of actual need, is necessary in order to be able to maximize the best quality of care and quality of life for your loved one. This is how we can Honor our Mother and Father, and assist them in aging with dignity.

With the senior population expecting to double in the next 20 years, from 35 million to 70 million Americans, and nuclear family size shrinking, the number of adult children being available as future caregivers will also be diminishing. And what will you do if you are an adult child of aging parents, are concerned and wanting to assure that your father or mother is doing well, and live more than several hours away? Email, text messaging, and social networking sites such as Facebook have shortened the distance between some relatives living miles apart, and will continue to flourish for generations under the age of 60. However for the present frail elderly individual, technology cannot be the answer. For many, there comes a time when older relatives need direct hands on support, frequent physical contact and availability, regardless of whether they live a long car ride away or require air travel.

Certainly, local caregiving responsibilities can be very challenging; caregiving at a distance poses significant additional dilemmas. An estimated 7 million Americans are long distance caregivers, primarily providing or managing the care of a parent or relative who lives at least one hour away. It is not a surprise that long distance caregiving is a growing trend that has become a common occurrence as people are living longer in this highly mobile society. However, this is also not an area that families acknowledge as needing a plan, until a crisis occurs typically around a medical issue. The adult daughter or son will then find themselves keeping a suitcase packed and ready to run in case of future emergencies, or as sometimes happens actually planning regularly scheduled long weekends to assure the parent is safe. "Suitcase care" however, does not prove effective in the long term. Besides the obvious exhaustion on the part of the adult child, it can become nearly impossible to manage what is necessary from a distance.

Therefore, establishing a strong support system that promotes as much independence as possibly, yet ensures assistance is always available when it is needed is necessary. Only then can honoring your parents become a reality, and not only a dream.

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