

Long-Distance Caregiving

How to be a Long-Distance Caregiver

Caring for a loved one who lives far away can be emotionally and financially challenging. Concerns about your loved one's safety, nutrition, health and care may seem overwhelming. You may also feel guilty and anxious because you cannot be there on a daily basis to see how your loved one is progressing. Moreover, if the person with Alzheimer's disease lives alone, it is important to monitor his or her ability to manage various daily tasks.

Determine What Services Are Needed

Visit the person with Alzheimer's disease to determine what kind of assistance he or she may need. Make the following observations:

- Is there appropriate and adequate food available?
- Is the person eating regular meals?
- What is the condition of the living environment? Has it changed?
- Are the bills paid?
- Do friends and relatives visit regularly?
- Is the person maintaining personal care routines such as bathing and grooming?
- Is the person still able to drive safely?

If you are unable to answer these questions, the person's doctor, neighbors, family members and friends can also be good sources of information.

Turn to Others for Help

Establishing an informal support system can help ensure the person's safety and give you peace of mind.

- **Family members and friends** can provide companionship. Develop a schedule and ask them to visit once a week or so, depending on how far away they live.
- **Neighbors** can check in regularly on your loved one. Ask if they will remain alert to anything unusual such as the smell of smoke or the sound of an alarm coming from your relative's home.
- **Community organizations**, such as churches, synagogues, neighborhood groups and volunteer organizations often provide companion services.

Make the Most of Your Visits

Few long-distance caregivers are able to spend as much time with their loved one as they would like. The key is to make periodic visits and use your time effectively:

- Make appointments with your loved one's physician, lawyer and financial adviser during your visit to facilitate decision-making.
- Meet with neighbors, friends and other relatives to hear their observations about how the person is doing. Ask if there have been any behavioral changes, health problems, or safety issues.
- Take time to reconnect with your loved one by talking, listening to music, going for a walk, or participating in activities you enjoy together.

Moving Your Loved One into Your Home

The decision to move the person into your own home is influenced by many factors. Here are some things to think about before moving the person into your home:

- Does he or she want to move? What about his or her spouse?
- Is your home equipped for this person?
- Will someone be at home to care for the person?

- How does the rest of the family feel about the move?
- How will this move affect your job, family, and finances?
- What respite services are available in your community to assist you?

Moving a person with Alzheimer's disease from familiar surroundings may cause increased agitation and confusion. You may want to talk with your loved one's physician or a social worker or call the Greater Pittsburgh chapter at **1(800) 652-3370** or **(412) 261-5040** for assistance before making a decision. In some situations, an assisted living or a residential care setting may be a better option for the individual.

Caring for a Loved One in a Facility

Whether your loved one lives in an assisted living or a residential care facility, it is important to maintain ongoing communication with the care staff and friends who visit regularly.

- Work with the managing nurse and physician and agree on a time when you can call to get updates on the person's condition and progress.
- Call family, friends, or other visitors and ask for their observations.
- When you visit, meet with the staff members who have primary responsibility for your loved one's care.

Resolving Family Conflicts

Caregiving issues can often ignite or magnify family conflicts, especially when people cope differently with caregiving responsibilities. Other family members may deny what is happening, resent you for living far away, or believe you are not helping enough. There may also be disagreement about financial and care decisions.

To minimize conflicts, try to acknowledge these feelings and work through them.

- **Have a family meeting.** Talking about caregiving roles and responsibilities, problems, and feelings can help ease tensions. You may want to reach out for help from a professional counselor or clergy.
- **Recognize differences.** Some family members may be hands-on caregivers, responding immediately to issues and organizing resources. Others may be more comfortable with being told to complete specific tasks.
- **Share caregiving responsibilities.** Make a list of tasks and include how much time, money and effort may be involved to complete them. Divide tasks according to the family member's preferences and abilities.
- **Continue to communicate.** Periodic family meetings or conference calls keep the family up-to-date and involved. Discuss how things are working, reassess the needs of both the person with Alzheimer's and the caregiver, and decide if any changes in responsibilities are needed.