

NSLAP WELLNESS TIP: Caring For Aging Parents and Loved Ones – Long-distance caregiving

The following is an article excerpt from Homewood Human Solutions™, your health and wellness provider.

Caring across the miles can be managed, but it will require extra time and patience. When an older family member lives in a different part of the country or the world, coordinating care usually requires a different type of time and attention. Here are some suggestions to help you:

Decide how involved you want to be

The amount of time and effort you'll need will depend on how much care, attention, and coordination is needed (and, of course, whether or not there are other close family members on hand). If your loved one needs professional care and support on a regular basis, and has an underlying medical condition, you'll probably find yourself researching and arranging for hands-on care and services and assuming the role of the 'primary care coordinator'.

Keep in touch ... things change

Make an effort to have regular contact with your family member to see how they're coping. Caregiving issues aside, having a social connection is very important, especially if the person lives alone. The best way to connect is by telephone. Calling gives you a chance to get a sense of what's going on. It is amazing what you can tell from a person's voice and by asking a few careful questions. Remember, be gentle and listen carefully.

Keep good care records

One of the most difficult tasks of caring for others, especially from afar, is to keep track of the many who, what, why, where, and when's of medical, financial and housing care. Use an inexpensive journal or ledger, or make a separate section in your electronic organizer. This should become your caregiving bible – a one source record of your situation and care plan. If you are computer literate, you might want to set this up as a spreadsheet.

Know who to call for help

When you are hundreds or thousands of miles away it's virtually impossible to do it alone. Instead, work towards building a solid local network of support for the care recipient. This could include paid professional help, like a geriatric care manager, a nursing agency, consultant, or accountant with an eldercare practice, some good friends and neighbours or caring cousins.

Make a list of all the people involved in the care process ahead of time if possible. Get referrals if you can for any new services needed. Keep track of full contact information: phone numbers, fax, email, and addresses. If you don't have connections or referrals for support professionals or services, there are various ways of finding resources in other cities.

Use technology to lessen the distance

The telephone will likely become your primary tool for making arrangements and planning the care and services you need. Even if you live in the same town, much of your care coordination will be done over the phone. New, affordable home-based technology allows you to be creative and more efficient with this valuable tool. For example, you can use the phone system for a conference call with family members across the country or around the world. You can set up a monthly phone meeting with key family members as part of the care routine. Check the front of the phone book for instructions or call the operator.

Just like at work, email is becoming a great help in the home environment. Instant messaging may also be useful. Broadcast email is a great way for family members in different locations to receive the same information at the same time. Answers and discussions can move quickly if necessary.

Install emergency response systems

A major concern is the possibility of your loved ones falling or becoming ill when they are alone. In these cases, personal alarm systems, also known as emergency response systems, can come in handy. These are simple devices worn around the neck or wrist, linked by radio frequency to the telephone. In an emergency, a person can activate the device and through the phone, the signal is picked up by a monitoring station. Each unit works differently, but the basic procedure is that the alarm company first tries to contact people on a provided list (e.g. adult children or a designated neighbour, etc.). If there is no response, they send help right away.

*For additional information, support, resources and counseling on health and wellness, visit the NSLAP website at www.nslap.ca. Please note that **NSLAP** is your “company” name when you register. When you call the NSLAP number at **1-866-299-1299**, (Français: 1-866-398-9505; TTY: 1-888-384-1152) Your call will be answered any time, day or night, 365 days per year.*