Caregiving from a distance

Like many of the people I meet in their 40s, 50s and 60s, my friend Liz is dealing with aging parents.

“If you are lucky,” she said, “your parents are still alive. If you are really lucky, they live close by.”

Liz is lucky, but she misses being really lucky because her parents live in another country. Through a series of moves, Liz’s parents landed in western Canada, with two children in the Seattle area and one in Toronto.

Her parents are in their 80s, and many of their friends are now in assisted living or have passed away, so they find themselves still living in their own home (lucky), but without much support nearby (not-so-lucky).

The National Institute on Aging estimates that there may be as many as 7 million longdistance caregivers in the United States. Somehow, they find themselves miles away from parents or loved ones who need a little extra help.

So what can you do to support parents or other loved ones who are not physically close by?

What can be done
The first challenge is to get clear on what sort of help is needed. You may be able to address the subject in a direct manner with your parent or loved one; however, don’t be surprised if that doesn’t happen easily.

Liz’s parents didn’t want to worry her. They tended to minimize problems they were having and say things like, “Oh, don't worry about us. We’re fine!” It was only a matter of time before a crisis came along. Now, she tries to talk to her parents at least twice a week and asks more directed questions.

Caregiving is a team sport, so build a good team. For Liz, this meant talking with her siblings and figuring out who could visit, who could call and who could unravel the red tape.

Make a list of people, and match the people to their talents. The tech-savvy person could investigate resources in your parent or loved one’s local area. They may also be able to search out information on specific health concerns or conditions from credible medical sites.

If someone is good with finances or accounting, they may be able to talk to your parents about what help they can afford and assist them with bills and planning.

If you find yourself as the sole team member or are simply overwhelmed by the tasks at hand, you may be able to find companies in either your parent’s local area or your own that will provide care coordinators or managers.

At some point, preferably early on, team members will need to clarify their boundaries. What can each of you afford to do? What are you emotionally prepared to do? Who can travel? How are your professional lives going to be affected?

Think about what will it take for you to make an emergency visit. Talk to your boss or your human resources department, investigate travel choices and think about who and what you will need to have with you. Liz and her sister both work for large organizations and have the benefit of the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), but not everyone does.

If possible, get all the bits and pieces of your parent or loved one’s life organized in one place. Ensure that someone has permission to get private financial and medical information. By having insurance, financial, military and other information at your fingertips, many administrative tasks associated with caregiving will go much more smoothly.

**Taking a break**

As is often the case, one of Liz’s parents is healthier than the other and has become the primary caregiver. Liz knows that it is important for the caregiver to get a break.

As a long-distance caregiver, you may be able to pay for respite care and extra household help or provide some of the care when you visit.
However, it is important that longdistance caregivers also recognize their own need for a break. Caregiving from a distance can be stressful and emotionally draining; you need to take time for yourself.

In a perfect world, we would each provide everything our aging parents need, but let’s face it: Perfection is not what aging is about, nor is caregiving. They are about doing our best with what we have and showing up for those we love.

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