

Caring from a distance factsheet

What is caring from a distance?

The fact that we are living longer is wonderful achievement. And whilst many will enjoy good health in their later years some will require some form of support. Caring from a distance occurs when families live apart from an older relative who might need assistance. This situation is of increasing concern to a significant percentage of the UK population. Caring from a distance can mean living relatively close by, or far away. The travelling time even for short distances can add stress to a distance carer's life, and often increase their guilt if they do not visit regularly. The stresses and guilt felt, as a result of being on call are often the same, however far apart the carer and person being cared for are. And of course the older relative may not receive the care and support that they need. Many distance carers are part of the 'sandwich generation', i.e. caring for both children and older people, whilst also working. Increased longevity means this caring role lasts longer, with increasing health issues for the older person and stress to the carer.

Why is it a problem?

Families are far more dispersed than fifty years ago, moving away to find work and affordable housing. People are far less likely to know and therefore rely on neighbours for help. Modern technology leads to longer working hours, which older people often find hard to understand. Older people expect to be cared for as they cared for their own parents, but this is often not possible, so expectations on both sides are often not met, resulting in enormous disappointment and guilt. Main problems for distance carers are:

- Emotional: feeling guilty, never seeming to do enough, coping with crises.
- Financial: dealing with not only care costs, negotiating benefits and personal budgets and managing an older parent's finances, but also dealing with the costs of regular distance travel, etc.
- Time: lives are hectic, hours long, and families are often juggling work, children and older parents
- Physical/mental: the impact of a lack of appropriate support on the older person.

What practical measures can help?

- **Have conversations early:** it not always easy and is often avoided, but having conversations with parents early on can be of enormous benefit.

Talk to them about their views on possible future care, financial planning, possible downsizing, granting power of attorney, making a will and even funeral wishes. You can find out more here:

<http://www.myageingparent.com/ten-questions-you-really-must-ask-your-parents/>

- **Try to introduce technology**, but don't call it that! Access to the internet can change older people's lives if they believe they can use it easily. It should be as much a part of their lives as a TV. Access to Skype for chats with the family, email and internet shopping can genuinely help to combat isolation. There are many useful software tools and helpful charities available assist with technology for older people. You can read more about getting older people online here: <http://www.myageingparent.com/category/best-technology-for-elderly/> . N.B. supermarket shopping companies often have a minimum spend beyond the amount a single older person might need to spend. Try [milk and more](#) instead, which has no minimum spend.
- **Take expert advice:** on financial and legal issues, but also on types of care and technology. There are many experts out there who advise distance carers, but make sure they are reputable and a member or affiliated of the [Society of Later Life Advisors](#). <http://www.myageingparent.com/category/finance-issues-for-elderly/> and <http://www.myageingparent.com/category/legal-advice-for-elderly/> provide more help.
- **Get help from the GP and local authority:** by the end of June 2014, all people aged 75 and over will be assigned a named GP with overall responsibility for their care. This service will involve GPs working with other health and social care professionals to ensure people receive care tailored to their needs. Make sure you have thought about what you want to ask the GP before you go and research the benefits to which your parent might be entitled. It really helps to be informed.
- **Make sure the home environment is safe:** make a check list before you visit and look at the lighting, trip hazards, electrics, stairs, etc: <http://www.myageingparent.com/top-tips-for-safety-at-home-for-older-people/> Some local authorities and local charities run handyman services to change light bulbs and fix minor things around the home. Consider an emergency 24 call out contract for heating problems. Think about relevant sensors and emergency alert systems in case of accidents. Ensure slippers fit well to prevent falls. Some boroughs run slipper exchanges to ensure a good fit. Also consider discussing with your parent downsizing to a more manageable housing option, enabling them to stay in their own

homes for longer: <http://www.myageingparent.com/downsizing-or-moving-for-the-elderly/>

- **Make the home environment secure:** ensure locks are fitted and can be easily used by the older person. Make the older person aware of particular scams by door, telephone, **letter** and email and give them a procedure for dealing with unwanted callers. There are too many unscrupulous people targeting older people. Read more here: <http://www.myageingparent.com/credit-card-fraudsters-scam-elderly/>
- **Help them to stay mobile and able to get out of the house:** The Royal Voluntary Service can provide door-to-door community transport services so that older people can maintain a good quality of life and stay connected to their local communities. Taxi accounts sound expensive, but can be very useful for occasional trips out and can help prevent people becoming housebound. Similarly, assistance is available on trains and planes: <http://www.myageingparent.com/public-transport-help-for-the-elderly/> Registering as disabled can give an older person access to parking and a range of discounts: <http://www.myageingparent.com/registering-the-elderly-as-disabled/> Note that not all disabled badges work in all places, so be careful or you may be fined!
- **Try to avoid sibling rivalry:** this can often rear its head in times of stress when caring for a relative, particularly if one sibling lives close and the other does not. Try to work out ways in which both parties can help, and always consider your parent first. <http://www.myageingparent.com/family-conflict-in-times-of-parental-illness/>
- **Dealing with hospital visits and stays:** this can be a very difficult time if you live at a distance. Royal Voluntary Service runs a [home from hospital scheme](#), which can help ensure that an older person can return home safely after a hospital stay. Some areas provide practical and social support to older people when they need it most during a hospital stay by providing friendship, companionship and support through conversation. For more advice on all aspects of caring at a distance, visit www.myageingparent.com

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