



Long-Distance Caregiving: How to Ensure Your Loved Ones are Safe at Home



When it is time to take care of an aging loved one, managing the overall and day-to-day tasks can be especially difficult for a caregiver who lives far away. You don't get that same sense of reassurance as you would seeing your loved one face to face.

Long-distance caregivers place a lot of trust in doctors, nurses and other aides. Since they are your boots on the ground, you want to make sure that your loved one's health — physical, mental and emotional — is as much of a priority to them as it is to you. That can be hard, but it is not impossible.

An aging loved one requires a lot of attention — you'll be the one making decisions, solving problems and making them comfortable. How can you make sure to take care of all of that when you live in a different state, across the country or even internationally?

This guide will help you navigate through the decisions you'll make as a long-distance caregiver, such as:

- Communicating with providers
- Choosing in-home caregivers
- Managing in-home care
- Making final arrangements and end-of-life decisions

Communicating with providers

Your loved one's care staff, from their primary care physician to their nursing assistants, are your eyes and ears when you live far away. You want to build a positive, personal relationship with doctors, aides, nurses, physical therapists, drivers and companions.

Weekly, if not daily, communication is crucial in helping you monitor your senior's health and well-being. Talking to each one regularly will not only help paint a holistic picture of your loved one's well-being, but will also give you strong allies in their care.

If you want to build rapport and ensure they will advocate on your behalf, take the time to:

- Get to know the individual roles they play in your loved one's care. For instance, if they are in a nursing home or assisted living facility, understand the difference in the job duties of a nurse and a certified nursing assistant.
- Understand and empathize with any challenges they face with your loved one, such as if their doctor has a hard time getting them to manage their diabetes or their in-home caregiver struggles to get them to go out for walks.
- Find out how much they know about your loved one outside of conversations related to their duties. For example, ask the driver what kinds of conversations he or she has with your aging senior when driving around.
- Know the primary contacts. For example, perhaps the nurse is a more reliable point of contact than the doctor.
- Be an active listener. Ask questions that require more than one-word answers, and summarize back to the speaker the information they have shared so you are confident you understand correctly.
- Show gratitude for their help. Yes, you are paying them for their services, but they are more likely to take their job to the next level and go above and beyond for you and your loved one if you regularly show appreciation for all they do.

Chances are that you'll have a variety of people to communicate with. These basic techniques can go along way with communication, but there will be other decisions you have to make as well.

Choosing in-home caregivers

Hiring in-home caregivers to assist may be a long-distance caregiver's best option for ensuring the safety and well-being of a loved one. Some seniors struggle with this idea in the beginning, but if you empower them to be an active partner in the process, you can work through their resistance.

The idea is to get them involved — maybe even excited — to welcome a new caregiver into the home. When it comes to looking for an in-home aide, there is no shortage of options. You may need someone to help with medical needs, housework, yard work, maintenance or simply to serve as a social companion.

Encourage your loved one to work with you on the decision by:

- Asking them to make a pros and cons list to help prioritize their needs and wants and act as a roadmap for the decision-making process.
- Interviewing candidates together and encouraging them to ask their own questions, share a meal together, go on a walk together, or participate in an activity together.
- Searching for a balance between the independence they want and the care they need.
- Ensuring the in-home aide gives them a sense of safety and security.
- Making sure the caregiver has access to transportation so your loved one can get out into the community and maintain a sense of freedom.

Considering the distance, your concern for your senior loved one's care might motivate you to move through the search quickly. However, if your loved one feels rushed, they may feel as if this isn't their decision after all. Don't let their resistance turn into procrastination.

Managing the house for in-home care

Most seniors are more comfortable in their homes. There are a lot of contingencies to consider with in-home care, including if your loved one needs round-the-clock care and making sure their home is accessible. With in-home care, you'll want to take charge of:

- Protecting your senior from slips and falls by installing handrails and no-slip flooring.
- Moving all essential rooms and belongings down to the ground floor, if the home has more than one level.
- Build a relationship with reliable contractors to help with:
 1. House cleaning,
 2. Yard work, or

3. Handyman repairs or maintenance.

- Considering downsizing to a smaller place that is easier to manage and costs less for utilities.
- Explore the cost of installing chair lifts or building ramps for seniors with mobility issues in homes with stairs.
- Painting walls, floors and countertops contrasting colors for those with vision impairments.
- Making sure all alarms — from fire to security — are working and regularly tested. Be sure the alarm company knows you are the point of contact.

Living arrangements are important conversations to have with your loved one, and you should make decisions about them together. Knowing they are safe, secure and well-cared for makes living at a distance less stressful.

Other decisions, including those that are much more difficult to discuss, need to be shared if you want to be on the same page about all your loved one's options.

Making final arrangements and end-of-life decisions

Talking about end-of-life decisions is an uncomfortable conversation to have. In many ways, you are holding the mirror of mortality to a senior's face and asking them to take a long, hard look. It's not always easy, but it doesn't have to be hard.

Explain to your aging friend or family member that making hospice decisions and final arrangements now can ensure they are remembered the way they want to be. Also, since you live at a distance, it will help you make decisions and arrangements quickly, instead of having to navigate the situation blindly and in grief.

Some topics you need to be sure you touch on include:

- What they want done with their remains — burial, cremation, donation to medicine or another option.
- Charities they would like their furniture and other belongings donated to.
- Preparing wills, endowments, finances and estates.
- Their preferred style of funeral and/or memorial service.
- Pre-paying for final arrangements.
- Their understanding of a do not resuscitate (DNR) directive, and their wishes surrounding one if they were to go into hospice or emergency care.

Discussing final arrangements is hard, especially if finances are a concern. Remember to be compassionate and take your time. These decisions don't have to happen all at once.

The long-distance caregiver is a role that many adult children, close friends and family members face. Some days, this role is more taxing than rewarding, but don't feel guilty or inadequate. Long-distance caregiving can go smoothly for both of you if you connect with caregivers, plan for final arrangements, and choose the right retirement facility or closely manage in-home care.