

Long-Distance Caregiving: If You Suspect There Is a Problem

One of the challenges of long-distance caregiving is deciding when your relative has a medical, legal, or other issue that needs prompt attention. Your relative may not want to alarm you by telling you about a problem, they may not realize there is a problem, or they may be suffering from memory loss and have trouble remembering exactly what happened. If you think your relative may be having a problem, try to:



Get a sense of the situation over the phone. Ask questions and listen to your relative's answers and tone of voice. Do you sense worry or uncertainty? Even if there isn't a serious problem, your relative may need the extra comfort of more phone calls or visits from nearby family members.

Be gentle but persistent. Your relative may not want to admit that anything is wrong because they are afraid of alarming you or think their problem will go away. Give them gentle but persistent encouragement to talk about concerns. Speak in a pleasant tone and try not to sound alarmed. If you sound anxious or overwhelmed by other responsibilities, your relative may hesitate to add to your worries.

Try to look at the "bigger picture." Evaluate any information you get in light of what you know from doctors, friends, family members, and your own observations. Take into account any medications your relative is taking as well as other recent events. For example, if your relative had a minor traffic accident, consider whether there have been other accidents or if taking any medications might be affecting their judgment. Having an overall view of a situation may help you decide what to do next.

Avoid overreacting. You may be tempted to take over and make a big change for your relative when a problem arises. But most people deal with changes more easily when they can prepare emotionally for them. Try to give your relative time to think about and plan for any big adjustments that you suggest.

Be tactful. Remember how hard it might be for a once-vigorous and healthy adult to ask for help. Avoid saying anything that might undermine your relative's self-confidence or independence such as, "You know you can't manage on your own."

Try not to force an issue. If your relative rejects your ideas for dealing with a problem that isn't an emergency, try not to overrule them. Allow your relative time to consider the idea and say that you'll check back in a day or so. Forcing your relative to accept a solution could cut off further discussion at a time when you need to keep the lines of communication open.

If your relative refuses help in a true emergency, get outside assistance. Get the help of a friend or professional such as the Area Agency on Aging who can bring in social services to assess the situation. If changes need to be made, your relative may be more receptive to the information coming from a neutral third party.

If Your Relative's Situation Changes

Your relative may require a different kind of help from family, friends, and professionals over time or when medical or financial needs change.

Monitor the situation closely. Call and visit more often or arrange for others to do this if your relative's medical, financial, or other needs have changed.

Involve your relative as much as possible in changes that will affect them. Let your relative know that even though you don't live nearby, their wishes and feelings are very important to you, and you want to know about them.

Before making big changes, consult with the people in your relative's care community. Friends, family, doctors, clergy members, social workers, or geriatric care managers may know of options and resources in your relative's community that you can't see from a distance. Your relative's primary care physician may not be permitted to release information to you, but you can always call and relay information and concerns to them. Make sure to have a list of medical professionals your relative visits regularly. The primary care provider may be able to prescribe needed home care services that would be covered under their health insurance or Medicare.

If you can't easily stop by to check on a relative, you may have a lot of strong emotions—worry, guilt, stress, and uncertainty about what to do. But if you stay in touch regularly with your relative and with an informal network of people who can help, you can make sure that your relative gets good care despite the miles between you.

Caterpillar's EAP is Available to Help

Caterpillar's **Global Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** is a free, voluntary, and completely confidential service provided to employees and their eligible family members to help meet many challenges at home and work, including concerns about elder care. You can access the EAP 24/7 online at [CaterpillarEAP.com](https://www.caterpillar.com/eap) or by phone at **1-866-CAT(228)-0565**.

Jacqueline Dolan, MA
© LifeWorks 2023