

# Family Dynamics in Distance Caregiving

Written by Molly Hofer and Cammy Seguin, University of Illinois Extension Educator, Family Life

If distance separates you from family members, you may find yourself supporting a parent or other relative who lives many miles away. You may face challenges that include communicating effectively with caregivers from a distance, feeling that you are not doing enough, and balancing care for yourself with care of others. This can bring on feelings of guilt and frustration. Therefore, it's important to understand some strategies to work with local caregivers and family members to help you balance distance caregiving with your own needs.

## Tips for Assisting Primary Caregivers

Keeping a supportive relationship with local caregivers is important for you and the care-receiver.

- Have realistic expectations. Even when you feel critical of the local caregivers, remember you are not there every day and may not see the entire situation.
- Resist taking over the minute you arrive for a visit. A distance caregiver who flies in for only a few days, changes all the rules, and then leaves can create total confusion and frustration.
- Look for ways to share the caregiving responsibilities. Tasks may be divided according to the skills and locations of all family members.
- Be a good listener.
- Be prepared to stay longer if the caregiving situation changes.
- Always remember to say thank you and show appreciation to the local caregivers and service providers.

Although you live at a distance, you may be the only caregiver. If that is the case, be honest with yourself about what you can do. Build a support network for yourself and your family. Remember, success depends on your ability to be prepared, communicate with your relative, and take care of yourself.

As a caregiver, you may feel conflicting emotions about the many different roles you have assumed. You may feel guilty for not being physically present to help. Anxiety may come from not knowing what's going to happen from day to day. Although these emotions are normal, they can cause constant worry and apprehension.

## Suggestions for Families

Family difficulties are typical. Old conflicts and hurts may resurface and cause family decision-making to be nearly impossible. Here are some suggestions to help families work through their problems.

- Take a family-oriented approach to caregiving by looking for ways that all family members can assume their share of the responsibilities.
- Remember the needs of your spouse and children. Family activities and vacations are still important.

- Keep communication open among family members even when relationships are tense. Not talking does not solve problems.
- If disagreements arise, consider a non-family member (friend, physician, clergyperson, or social worker) to help with the discussion. Focus on strategies and solutions rather than problems.
- Be honest with yourself.
- Consider your own needs when making caregiving decisions. Balance care of yourself with care for others.