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Long-Distance Caregiving [1]

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Caring for a person with cancer who lives far away presents unique challenges. When a caregiver cannot be physically present to provide care at all times, many of the usual caregiving concerns may be intensified and the logistics may be more complicated. The following suggestions can help you become a more effective caregiver, regardless of your location.

Get organized. Collect and sort information about the medical, financial, and legal needs of the person with cancer so that you can make informed decisions, if that is your caregiving role, or help others make informed decisions. Make sure that the correct legal documents and permissions, such as advance directives [3], are in place so that you can access medical and, in some cases, financial information if the person with cancer becomes unable to manage those issues alone. Find more information about managing the cost of cancer care [4] and managing someone's cancer care [5].

Introduce yourself. Call the health care team members involved in the care of the person with cancer to introduce yourself and let them know that you play a key role in providing care. Give them your phone number(s) and other contact information in case they need to reach you.

Explore professional services. Contact the person's doctor, oncology nurses, social worker [6], or state or local health department officials for referrals for home care services [7] that are provided by reputable, professional caregivers. Home care services can range from providing basic medical care to assisting with housekeeping, meals, and personal care. Talk with the person's insurance company about which, if any, home care services are covered.

Recruit and organize volunteers. Contact relatives, neighbors, family friends, and members of religious, civic, and social organizations who might be willing to perform caregiving tasks. There are resources on the Internet, such as online communities for support [8], where you can list specific tasks the person with cancer needs help with, and your family and friends can volunteer and coordinate these tasks. This is also an easy way to keep a large group of people updated without having to make individual phone calls or write separate emails.

Prepare for unexpected travel. Be prepared to travel if the person with cancer needs your help unexpectedly. Preparations may include setting aside vacation or sick days from work, researching travel options, and arranging for someone to help care for your own family while you

are away.

Provide and seek emotional support. Reach out through regular phone calls, letters, and e-mails, which can reassure the person with cancer of your continued support. It is also equally important for long-distance caregivers to seek out support for themselves [9] from family, friends, or a counselor [10] to help deal with stress and emotional struggles -- such as depression or anxiety [11] -- that can be associated with caregiving. For example, many long-distance caregivers feel guilty about living far away from the person with cancer, wishing that they could be closer and provide more help. Or they may feel overwhelmed by the challenges of coordinating care from afar. Identify people who are sources of emotional support and meet with them on a regular basis.

Making the most of visits

The key to a successful visit is planning ahead and using the time wisely to perform caregiving tasks that cannot be done from afar. The following suggestions can help you make the most of a visit.

Meet with a member of the medical team. Set up an appointment with the person's doctor, oncology nurse, or social worker to discuss the medical issues and care plan in person. Before the trip, prepare a list of questions for the health care professional. It is important to include the person with cancer in the discussions, if possible.

Meet with the person's informal support network. Arrange to meet with friends, neighbors, and members of community organizations who are helping provide care. Ask if they have any concerns or suggestions on ways to improve care, and ask that they contact you immediately if they notice any problems.

Schedule a break for the local caregivers. If possible, plan to take over some of the local caregivers' responsibilities. In addition to providing the local caregivers with some relief, this gives you the opportunity to reassess the caregiving needs and resources first hand. Observe the person's condition and the condition of the surroundings. Is there food in the refrigerator? Is the house clean? Is the person bathed and groomed? Spend time talking to the person with cancer about their feelings regarding the care they are receiving.

Take time to reconnect. Schedule quality time with the person with cancer by participating in activities that you enjoy doing together.

More Information

Organizing Your Cancer Care [12]

Young Adults Caring for a Parent With Cancer [13]

Caregiving[14]

Additional Resources

Family Caregiver Alliance: Handbook for Long-Distance Caregivers [15]

Caring From a Distance [16]

National Institute of Aging: So Far Away: Twenty Questions and Answers About Long-Distance Caregiving [17]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/caregiver-support/long-distance-caregiving
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25278
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/24865
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/25015
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/24556
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/25030
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/24634
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/25031
[10] http://www.cancer.net/node/24699
[11] http://www.cancer.net/node/25479
[12] http://www.cancer.net/node/25065
[13] http://www.cancer.net/node/24746
[14] http://www.cancer.net/node/25009
[15] http://caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=1034
[16] http://www.cfad.org/
[17] http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/so-far-away-twenty-questions-and-answers-about-long-distance-caregiving-0