

Memory Moment

Distance makes the caregiving...harder?

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We all know the old saying “absence makes the heart grow fonder”. When it comes to being a dementia caregiver, ‘absence’ or distance from the person you’re caring for can add an unexpected and challenging layer of difficulty. In my experience working with families who are in the long-distance caregiving role, I’ve put together some suggestions of ways to manage care from afar, but still support yourself in the process.

Support family and friends that might be ‘boots on the ground’

I often see, especially when a person is first beginning to show dementia symptoms, concerns from family/friends that live nearby and are more acquainted with the day to day routine are often dismissed by out of town relatives. Why? “Well, when I call Mom and talk to her, nothing has changed.” “He remembered when I was visiting next, so there’s nothing wrong.” Out of town relatives are often the last to notice dementia symptoms.

Unfortunately, this can be frustrating and upsetting for families who live near the person they are caring for because they might already be questioning if the changes they are seeing are legitimate. I’ve often see this tear families apart and create division. For long-distance caregivers, while it is good to question and investigate possible dementia symptoms and functioning impairments, it’s helpful to start from a place where you are validating what your other family members are reporting. Be supportive, and encourage them to keep track of the changes they are seeing in a journal.

Look for ways that you can contribute from afar

Get creative in what you can contribute. I’ve had several families who have split up responsibilities such as managing bills and delegated to family members who have expertise in the area and can manage online accounts. Some families choose to help pay for groceries, respite care, or other bills since they are not helping with day to day care.

Set boundaries for yourself

As a caregiver in general, guilt over making correct care decisions or uncertainty about future care needs can be overwhelming. As a long-distance caregiver, these feelings are often accompanied by feelings of helplessness. Many of my clients report that they wish they could help out more or that they are somehow ‘failing’ the person they are caring for. Give yourself permission to only do caregiving duties certain days of the week. Coordinate with other family members, friends, or paid caregivers to ensure that the person you’re caring for has what they need, but then focus on setting realistic boundaries for yourself in what you can do.

Take care of yourself

In any caregiving role, making yourself the number one priority is essential. It's similar to the instructions you get in the airplane safety demo: "Put your oxygen mask on first." Without recharging and focusing on your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health, your ability to be a caregiver will diminish. Joining a support group (check out the Alzheimer's Association at alz.org) or finding a counselor that specializes in caregiving challenges can be a helpful addition to your life. Does distance really make the caregiving harder? Perhaps, but it can also make you stronger.

For more information about Memory Moment articles & Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness, check out their website at www.effinghamalz.org. If you are a caregiver & have specific questions or situations you would like information on, please feel free to call Shannon Nosbisch at 217-663-0010 or Amy Sobrino at 618-363-8372.