More than 93 million Americans are expected to travel in order to spend time with their family during the holidays. These visits are a good time for family members to take note of how their aging family members are faring.

CARING FOR PARENTS FROM A DISTANCE

Contributed by Megan Prentiss, spokesperson for Lively

More than 43 million people in the U.S. are responsible for the care of an aging adult and more than 50 percent of all adult Americans expect to care for an elderly family member at some time. Additionally, there are roughly 7 to 10 million adults who need to care for aging parents long distance. Long-distance caregiving can be worrisome and stressful for both adult children and their parents.

“The vast majority of older people want to live out their lives in their own homes, and there is good reason to believe that this is good for self-esteem, health and life satisfaction,” says Dr. Laura L. Carstensen, founding director of the Stanford Center on Longevity. “Yet this can be a challenge for older people and for their adult children who worry about their older relatives. They’re spread so thin balancing jobs and caring for children they cannot be around on a daily basis.”

Gatherings around the holidays bring together people who are separated by geography the majority of the year, introducing the opportunity for caregivers (long distance or otherwise) to start a dialogue with older loved ones about their long-term living arrangements. Here are some useful tips for starting that conversation.

Find the right opening

As with all topics that are sensitive, it is more effective to have them in-person. Keeping it
private, a one-on-one conversation will encourage a more frank discussion. Use examples that they can relate to such as situations that are happening with some of their friends or siblings and what they would want to happen in a similar situation for themselves.

**Avoid reversal of roles**

No “parent-sitting,” please. When your parents need help, understand your role and avoid becoming their ‘parent’ as the consequences can be demeaning. You can be more effective helping them maintain independence and respect. Offer suggestions, don’t tell them to “do” anything. Remind them that it is your mutually beneficial goal to have them safe and happy in their own homes. Avoid expressing frustration with the common triggers like when parents repeat themselves or ask the same question again. Next Avenue offers a good guide on the things not to say to your aging parents.

**Understand the desire to stay at home**

Recognize the desire to “age in place” at home for as long as possible. The desire to remain independent and safely at home while aging is a major concern for most. In fact, recent research revealed that the top two things that older adults fear most are losing their independence and being moved to a nursing home. As such, ask your parents if they would be willing to make a few sacrifices in order to remain at home — more regular contact with you, be more social with community network or consider bringing in help with housework or other tasks.

**Look for solutions**

Seek out innovative solutions that help aging parents stay in their home for longer and relieve you from worry. Companies have recognized that the existence of better tools on the market provides welcome relief for long-distance caregivers, too. Lively’s activity-sharing product respects the privacy of older adults with a way to measure daily routine living patterns while giving family members insight when help may be needed. Taking medication on time? Eating regularly? Being as active as possible? When something is amiss, Lively makes sure older adults and their families are connected. Also, the Village to Village Network helps seniors with everyday tasks such as grocery shopping and transportation to doctor appointments.

**Make sure it is collaborative**

Be sure to uncover what parents want for themselves. Living at home longer, for sure, but are there other things they would love to do with your help? As a reminder that they still have many years to enjoy live, explore some of their desires or ‘unfinished business.’ Organizations such as My Jump help seniors fulfill items on their bucket lists. And finally, being empathetic to be sure parents and older relatives feel very much a part of all decisions is critical. Letting them know that they are loved and that you share their goals will do wonders for coming to an agreement that gives everyone peace of mind.

**About the author:**

*Megan Prentiss is the spokesperson for Mylively.com, which helps create new avenues of connection between older adults who live on their own and loved ones.*

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