

Caring From a Distance: Planning for Aging Parents

By Janine Boldrin



Caring for aging parents can be extra challenging for military personnel and their families. Photo by Julie Swenson

Being in the military can compound the everyday concerns associated with caring for parents or medically compromised extended family members. But preparing for this eventuality is often forgotten in the midst of deployments and constant moves.

"These are things that can't wait until after a crisis occurs but [that] need to be part of thoughtful future planning," said James Martin, Ph.D, a professor at the Bryn Mawr College Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research.

Martin, a retired Army Colonel and recognized national leader in the area of military family services and

support, co-authored a paper that identified senior ranking officers and non-commissioned officers as a population for whom eldercare is particularly problematic.

Even though these individuals typically live a great distance from aging parents, they are usually sought out by their families to handle matters because they are often viewed as the "most responsible" members of their family. These service members are often at a demanding point in their careers and can find themselves dealing with an elderly parent's crisis at an already busy time.

Growing problem

About seven million family members in the United States regularly travel at least an hour to assist ailing relatives with transportation, errands, help around the house and other tasks, according to AARP.

"This is a growing concern because, unlike in the old days, people don't live in the same community as their parents, making the future of long-distance care a big issue," said Lynn Feinberg, senior strategic policy advisor at the AARP Public Policy Institute.

Military families have some unique concerns that compound the problems eldercare can raise:

- Deployments and a less accommodating work environment contribute to increased anxiety levels over being able to pick up at a moment's notice for an emergency.
- Farther than average distances between themselves and their family makes physically checking in less possible and frequent moves may prohibit service members from bringing the family member to live with them.

- Female NCOs and officers may find themselves in a particularly challenging situation based on cultural expectations that lean toward daughters taking on the care of aging parents and, if they have children, the challenge of being a dual caregiver at what is often the peak of their career.

Critical steps

Even with all of these added issues to work through, many service members make the mistake of only discussing eldercare when an emergency situation arises.

“They do the best they can but it all occurs within the context of the crisis,” said Martin. “And that is not the time for thoughtful planning around these issues.”

A service member may also find themselves deployed or overseas when an elderly parent needs help, making it difficult — if not impossible — to meet the expectations that both work and family demand.

Planning for the care of loved ones should be part of an ongoing discussion that occurs early on, before a crisis occurs, said Feinberg. She emphasized that it is important to be physically present with your parents and not have that conversation on the phone.

Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, Feinberg recommended taking time during a visit to plan for the eventuality of a parent’s care for both emergency situations and everyday needs.

Need expert help?

Geriatric care managers can assist in doing an assessment of the older person to help families develop a plan of care. There are also resources available on the Internet including information found through Family Caregiver Alliance (www.caregiver.org) and the eldercare locator sponsored by the federal government (www.eldercare.gov), where families can use tools to form an eldercare plan of action.

Establishing communication

An early step in the eldercare process is deciding how to communicate with the parent and other relatives who are involved in their care.

Visits and telephone calls are ideal, but through technology like Skype, families can hold meetings with other siblings to develop plans. And, depending on a loved one’s abilities, families can establish an email account, get them a cell phone and/or social media accounts to stay in touch.

“My mother-in-law is sixty-five and has been wheelchair-bound due to getting her foot amputated from diabetes,” said Kerry Brant, a military spouse whose family lives in West Point, New York. “We check in with her through email, phone calls, and now we have her signed up through Facebook.”

Keeping an open dialogue on health issues and communicating needs is essential for effective eldercare; however, sometimes a parent’s health may prevent them from letting you know there is a problem.

Brant added that her family keeps in contact with her mother-in-law’s sisters and a friend that lives closer to her, plus the church bishop calls to give them updates on how she is doing and her living conditions.

“It is really important to set up a system of support for a parent’s safety,” said Feinberg. “The military person can check in with the neighbors to get contacts, along with clergy and friends.”

When you do go for a physical visit, children should keep an eye out

for signs of a parent needing more care. Feinberg said to look for things like unpaid bills laying around and spoiled food in the refrigerator. She also recommended walking around the house to look for falling hazards and evaluating what safety devices may be installed to prevent accidents from occurring.



Military families often live far from their extended families. Photo by Julie Swenson

Beth Whipple, a military spouse who lives more than a thousand miles away from her parents, recommends taking the time to discuss with parents how they would like to handle situations such as if they need to go into a nursing home, discussing how to cover expenses like long-term care, insurance and health benefits, and learning where important papers are located.

Whipple said it can be frustrating to have to wait and not be there to support her mother and other family members through her father’s recent health issues, but she takes comfort by keeping in contact with as many people as possible to keep abreast of any problem. The visits her other family members are able to make to check in and provide updates on her father are also key to her peace of mind.

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While some military families may be able to rely on local friends and family for support, sometimes there may not be anyone available, or their loved one's condition may warrant professional care or care outside of the home. In these instances, military families, not unlike their civilian counterparts, need to evaluate their options for hiring caregivers or finding living facilities where their family member's needs will be met.

Developing resources

"For those families [who] are assigned overseas, to include those members that are deployed overseas, trying to deal with issues back home is really difficult," said Martin. "Part of our concern was to develop some ways they can do some thoughtful planning so they don't get to the point in time when they can't respond to [a crisis] because of their military service."

Michael Parker, Ph.D, an associate professor at the University of Alabama's Center for Mental Health and Aging, who retired from the U.S. Army Medical Service Corps, has conducted research with Martin on military families and parent care. Parker's goal has been to develop a comprehensive program, similar to the "family care plan" that soldiers put in place prior to a deployment, which service members and their families can use in their eldercare planning.

Parker's research has led to the development of the Parent Care

Readiness Program (PCRP). The program is designed to help "educate, motivate, and support caregivers to become more proactive and less reactive in the development of a comprehensive program for their aging parents," according to Parker.

The PCRP helps caregivers handle eldercare situations by offering them an individualized assessment and plan of action for their loved one. Parker hopes to release the program using the military leadership school system to target those with the greatest need for this type of system: adult children at midlife.

"We have conducted an initial clinical trial at the U.S. Air War College, have completed preliminary research with the U.S. Army War College, have conducted service talks at several military installations, and have provided formal training to the U.S. Army and Air Force chaplains," said Parker. "We hope to test our web-based program in the spring of 2012."

Whether you chose to use programs like the PCRP, online resources or local services, preparing for eldercare decisions by opening the lines of communication with parents, researching your options and putting a plan in place ahead of time will put your military family in a much better position than waiting until an emergency situation occurs. ●

Janine Boldrin is a freelance writer and military spouse who lives near Fort Campbell, KY.

Tips from Sittercity on Eldercare

Did you know that Sittercity, an online service that connects families with caregivers, not only helps military families connect with babysitters but also with eldercare providers? Melissa Anderson, Executive Vice President at Sittercity, discussed finding a caregiver for your loved one from a distance.

- Sittercity can help military families locate the right level of care for their aging loved one anywhere across the United States. Memberships for military families are funded by the DoD.
- The first step to finding an eldercare provider is to define what your aging loved one needs. There is quite a range of care that may be needed by the elderly. Anderson added that Sittercity is developing a best-in-class needs assessment that will launch in 2012 to assist families in this process. This tool will help families understand the needs of their loved ones and help them to identify the best fit solution, whether it is through an individual or facility.
- Sittercity has a four-step screening process they recommend to help families get comfortable with selecting a particular caregiver: checking reviews from other families who have used the caregiver, background checks, conducting a phone interview, and checking references that can be found on their profile. If a military family lives too far to be able to interview the candidate in person, finding a family member or friend who can do so can also add a level of additional comfort when selecting the right caregiver.

Visit www.sittercity.com for more information

Planning is key to successfully caring for loved ones from a distance. Photo by Julie Swenson

