



Long Distance Caregiving – Senior Care Corner Show Transcript

Barry: Welcome to the Senior Care Corner Show, I'm Barry.

Kathy: And I'm Kathy. Thanks for joining us.

Barry: As always you'll find us online at SeniorCareCorner.com with solutions, tools and information for families and others who care for and about senior adults.

Well Kathy, we've got another good show today for everyone at least something we think they'll enjoy. In our feature segment we're going to talk about family caregiving as being something other than just a local type of thing. We're going to talk about how family members can and do make a difference in the lives of their senior loved ones from a distance.

But first you've got some news items for us today?

Kathy: Well yes Barry. I've found some interesting items on a variety of topics for everyone. Our first item:

Anemia in Older Age Linked to Dementia

A new community based study shows that low hemoglobin levels in older adults predicted long term risk for developing dementia.

Seniors with anemia had a 64% higher likelihood of dementia during the 11 year follow-up in this study.

Researchers point out that the implications for prevention are not yet clear.

Chronic brain hypoxia associated with anemia may contribute to dementia development. Anemia could be a marker for poor overall health including nutrient deficiencies such as B12 and iron. Prevention should target improving the hemoglobin levels and the overall health status of our seniors.

Barry: Well I think that last point was a good one there Kathy. Whether or not it's linked to dementia, certainly we should take steps to make sure our seniors loved ones are in good health including avoiding anemia.

Kathy: Definitely! Our next news item:

We Shrink as We Age, but There Are Ways to Avoid It

Most of us think that we get shorter as we age. Starting at around 40 we lose about four tenths of an inch in height each decade. By the time we're 70, men lose about an inch and a half in height and women lose up to 3 inches.

The disks between the vertebrae of the spine dry out and get thinner resulting in a shrinking spine. At the same time the arches in our feet flatten as we age.

Muscle mass also decreases as we age causing our posture to change. We seem to lean forward more making us appear shorter.

Recent research found that shrinkage can be controlled. Researchers surveyed over 17,000 adults starting at age 45 focusing on lifestyle choices that have influence over how much height we lose.

Those living in cities lost more height than country people. Educated men lost less height than illiterate men. However, education level was not found to be an influence for women. People who had more height loss also showed more short term memory loss and inability to perform basic math problems according to the researchers.

Poor diet, lack of exercise and smoking also led to height loss. Those with a diet rich in calcium and vitamin D, who don't smoke, drink in moderation and exercise regularly are less likely to suffer from height loss.

Barry: That's interesting. I wonder if there's a limit to the potential for height loss, in other words if we keep growing older and older as is projected if we'll just keep getting shorter.

Kathy: Well, especially if we're not taking care of ourselves correctly. Our next news item:

Many Docs Don't Discuss Dietary Supplements

A new study says doctors are doing a poor job of providing patients with information about vitamins, minerals, herbs and other dietary supplements.

Many people are taking supplements which carry risks including harmful interactions with their prescription medications. Some are even substituting dietary supplements for their medications.

Transcripts of audio recordings made during over 1,500 primary care doctor visits between 1998 and 2010 were analyzed. Only 350 had discussions about dietary supplements.

This is the first study looking at the content of discussions between doctors and patients.

Discussions about supplements should include risks, effectiveness and costs that might help make informed patient decisions. Doctors seem to discuss herbals more than vitamin and minerals because they are more harmful interacting with conventional medications.

It's suggested by the FDA and the Institutes of Health to discuss taking any dietary supplement with your physician before you take any in order to remain safe.

Barry: Well that's too bad that they don't talk about it more. As our most trusted medical advisors, they've got to know that if we don't hear it from them someone else is going to step in and fill the void.

Kathy: Definitely, and so many not only of our seniors but all of us are taking supplements. Our last news item:

Could Hot Cocoa Improve Brain Power in seniors?

A new study in its preliminary stages has found that seniors who had impaired blood flow to their brains showed an improvement in memory skills after drinking two cups of hot cocoa a day.

This admittedly early research is not yet encouraging seniors to stock up on hot chocolate since it isn't clear that the hot cocoa itself caused the increased brain activity nor whether the additional calories and fat from the cocoa could worsen obesity which thereby worsen brain activity.

Because we know that brain cells need fuel and blood flow provides that fuel, researchers continue to look into ways to improve our blood flow to our brains. The brain requires 20% of our daily energy intake in order to function.

The subjects were given hot cocoa with flavanol or without. The flavanol compound in chocolate is thought to improve the blood flow. Some in the study had poor blood flow at the beginning of the research, almost all had high blood pressure and half had some form of diabetes.

Those with impaired blood flow showed improvement in memory testing while those with normal blood flow showed no changes in their memory. Interestingly, the flavanol content of the drink had little affect according to the researchers.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, this study is too small and poorly controlled to recommend people begin drinking cocoa every day.

Barry it's interesting to know that there are researchers anxious to unlock the mysteries in the brain and to improve our senior's health but we need to remember to be cautious that research needs to be validated in order to make a change in their lifestyle. In the meantime, while we wait, enjoy your cocoa!

Barry: I was going to say, I imagine you looked long and hard for something, ANYTHING that talks about benefits of associated with chocolate in any form don't you?

Kathy: How'd you know?

Barry: Laughs. Well thanks Kathy, some interesting news items there today. Like what you've gotten there for us and something you don't hear every day, so I think it's really helpful.

Long Distance Caregiving

Now in our feature segment today we are going to talk to and about the millions of Americans who wish they could -- or already do -- provide care to a senior loved one even though they live some distance away. Over the last few generations, families in the US have become more dispersed for a variety of reasons. As a result, many seniors are reaching the age where they need assistance but only some and often none of their "closest" family members are near them.

Now "out of sight, out of mind" isn't applicable to long distance family caregivers. Often, in fact, it can be the opposite, with the "not knowing" that comes with not being there and wanting SO much to help aging family members becoming a real source of stress that can impact their own lives and their ability to care for their children and other loved ones near them not to mention themselves.

One thing is sure, while those providing care from a distance may be isolated they are not alone. We've seen statistics indicating long distance caregiver's number in the single digit millions.

Kathy: That's a big number but we think even that undercounts those who are providing care in some fashion --even when more who want to do so but just don't realize how easy it can be to provide care that is meaningful to their senior loved one.

Barry: Good point, Kathy. I think a lot of those statistics also take into account only the adults who are providing care and overlook the many teens and even younger people who can and are providing what we consider to be care.

Now if you're not sure whether what you're doing or could do qualifies you as a "caregiver," you might want to check out the video we put together a while back "You Might Be a Family Caregiver." In that video we borrow from the most famous routine of comedian Jeff Foxworthy to point out some of the MANY things and we mean MANY things family members can do for loved ones that would qualify as caregiving. It might take hours, or even days, to list everything we could do -- and even then we would miss many -- but we want everyone to know there are many ways in which family members can enhance the lives of older loved ones and thus be considered caregivers.

Kathy: As we were preparing for this discussion, Barry, I was thinking we might want to put together a new version of the video talking specifically about long distance caregiving.

Barry: Great idea. We should do that in the near future.

In the meantime though, why don't we jump to talking about what long distance family members might do to be caregivers for their senior loved ones.

Long Distance Family Caregiver Contributions

Being There for Senior Loved Ones, Even from a Distance

One way long distance family members can be caregivers is to “be there” for them.

Kathy: Well wait a minute Barry, how can someone at a distance be there? Are you talking about a lot of traveling?

Barry: Not at all, Kathy. I'm not talking about physically being there but emotionally. Family members living remotely from seniors have long been able to be there for them via phone calls and letters but today's digital world lets us cut that distance down so much more. Sure, there are still the standard voice calls which, by the way, technology and changes in the communications business have taken from being expensive when we were kids to make them free for most people, at least within the US.

There's so much now we can do beyond making voice calls though and give more of a closeness and a feeling of almost being there. We often talk about Skype and how it provides the ability for video calls. We hear many seniors gush about their latest video call with grand & great-grandchildren and how they feel part of each other's lives because the distance gap has been closed.

Kathy: And those like me who have newer Apple devices can use Facetime to quickly link up which I do with my grandchild. With broadband connections you can talk and see each other every day for as long as you want.

Barry: That alone may be enough reason for family members to get one of the new iPads for their senior loved one, Kathy. Of course there are many other benefits that go with it. Now the original version with the front-facing cameras are already out there with discounted prices and likely only becoming cheaper as newer versions become available.

Keep in mind, though, that it's not just via seeing and talking with family members that we can “be there” for them. Digital technology has also replaced the letter writing that

children and grandchildren have long promised to do though with mixed results. Sure, we've had email for a long time but now there is so much more we can do.

We often, including a recent blog post, talk about getting senior loved ones active on social media and social networking sites. One of what we see as the biggest benefits is the ability to communicate with family members where they are active already. Just as companies are learning that social media is the best way to find and engage with customers now, grandparents are finding it easier and enjoyable to be a bigger part of the lives of their younger family members.

Kathy: The digital communication goes beyond the online, too. Much has been said for several years about children spending a lot of time on their phones, not talking but texting with friends. For many, that texting includes conversations with parents and grandparents; as you said, Barry, engaging where they are already. Younger family members who are already texting and enjoy communicating that way should be encouraged to strike up text conversations with senior loved ones. Remember, too, that texting can go beyond words to include the sharing of pictures, too, so younger caregivers – yes, this is caregiving too – can show and not just tell what is going on in their lives.

Barry: Absolutely, Kathy! Great point about pictures, too. Whether its texting, social networking or even “old fashioned” email; the old adage that a picture's worth a thousand words can certainly apply here. This is another area in which digital has enhanced our lives just so much more. We can take more pictures more easily than ever before because most cell phones, and not just smartphones, have the capability.

Most pictures today are taken by cell phones in fact, not standalone cameras. Of course, not only is the taking of pictures easy, but also the sharing. No longer do we have to wait – and pay – for pictures to be developed before taking or sending them via snail mail to family members. With digital sharing we can let long distance family members be in our lives in almost real time.

All that picture taking and sharing capability isn't without problems, of course, and some discretion is needed and, when using social media sites, privacy settings. That goes both for family caregivers and senior loved ones.

Kathy: Don't forget those pictures don't have to be still photos. Videos are so easy to take and share as well; something as simple as a birthday greeting or even “hello” can mean so much more when senior loved ones can see you saying it.

Barry: I agree, Kathy.

It's clear there are so many ways now that family members can “be there” for senior loved ones from a distance and add enjoyment to their lives. There is another side to

these communications too one which really deepens its role in caregiving for senior loved ones and demonstrates how technology has enhanced our ability to do so from a distance.

Checking Seniors Health & Wellbeing

Now when we're communicating with senior loved ones, even from a distance, it gives us a chance to learn how they're doing, especially when we communicate regularly. No, I don't mean by asking how they are doing but by listening to their voice, to what they say is happening in their lives, listening to changes that may indicate a problem.

Do they sound sad, like they have an illness, tired, or even frustrated with life in general?

Kathy: This is easier and can be more effective when you use a video call. You can see if their expressions are changing from what you usually see; if they look like they aren't taking care of themselves or if they have cuts and bruises that may indicate a fall or even abuse. Do they look like they are losing weight over time, which may indicate not eating properly? Are they wearing the same clothes each time or washing their hair? In some ways, being at a distance can be an advantage in spotting things that happen gradually and might be missed by someone who sees them every day.

Barry: I agree. Of course, family members may sense these things already and don't take action because they don't know how or are afraid of overreacting. The reality is that simply by reacting to what we see and hear we can help senior loved ones get the help they need, which is at the heart of being a family caregiver.

Reacting to What We See & Hear

Effective reaction to concerns we have is often a function of simply being prepared. Sure, it would be easy to say "jump in the car" or "hop a plane" and go see them, which family caregivers sometimes feel they want or should do, but isn't always possible or even needed. The key is to have someone locally where you can turn for a given situation.

If it's apparent there is a serious injury, regardless of cause, or illness the right first call may be to local law enforcement. Calling 911 from the distant location where you live won't get you THEIR emergency responders so you should have the number to call for their location in your phone contacts and your resource list.

Kathy: If you're not sure that it's an emergency, many police departments will do what they typically call "wellness checks," sending an officer by the house to see how your senior is doing.

Barry: A friend or family member who lives near a senior loved one can be the second call in a serious situation or the first call if you simply want someone to have a firsthand

look at the situation. Often neighbors will look out for each other anyway so having the number of a neighbor or two of an aging family member can be a great way to find out what's happening.

Keep in mind that vulnerable seniors are at risk for abuse from someone they and family members trust, such as a care provider or even a family caregiver. If so, you aren't going to get honest feedback if it's the abuser you call with your concern. Don't let abuse go unreported and untreated for fear of being wrong and overreacting. Call two or even three people to go by and check on your senior loved one.

If your senior has a case manager you could contact that person to check up on them also. If you truly suspect abuse, physical, emotional or financial, is occurring, you can call adult protective services to file a formal complaint and get an investigation started to protect your senior.

Kathy: If you fear a senior loved one is being abused but are afraid of creating trouble or embarrassment for them by calling emergency responders, this may be a situation in which a family caregiver is better off bridging the distance by getting in the car or even on the plane and making a personal visit. Each individual family caregiver is different, but dealing with the uncertain and eliminating the stress and worry about the wellbeing of a family member might be well worth the cost in time and money by simply seeing for yourself.

Barry: Good point, Kathy. Each family caregiver has to make that decision for his or herself.

Other Long Distance Family Caregiving

In addition to being there, even from far away, there are a number of other ways family members can enhance the lives of their senior loved ones from a distance. When looking at what you can do to help, it is often beneficial to consider those things you are good at doing or particularly enjoy doing. Not only may these be the things with which you can provide the greatest benefit to a senior loved one, but if they know these are things you enjoy they may be less likely to resist your assistance.

Healthcare Arrangement & Advocacy

Kathy: Family caregivers who work in healthcare or who understand and are skilled at working in the healthcare system can provide care to senior loved ones in more than one way. The healthcare system is complicated and can be confusing or simply difficult to work through for those who aren't experienced – and even some who are. A family member with the right background can help a senior loved one understand what is happening to them medically and what healthcare providers are saying and doing –

what the treatment plan means and how to best follow it. It can provide great comfort for a senior to know there is a personal expert in their corner.

A knowledgeable family member can also help seniors find the right healthcare provider or facility to meet their needs, from researching the right sources and knowing how to interpret what they find to knowing the right things to request when talking with potential providers. Knowing the right questions to ask during the interviews and how to interpret the answers can go a long way in helping a family member select the right professional caregivers or healthcare providers.

Sure, for some it helps to have familiarity with care and providers in the area, but much of the effectiveness and benefit to senior loved ones can be achieved by family members who live far away.

Barry: Great points Kathy and I know you speak from experience there.

Contributing Specialized Knowledge

Now healthcare isn't the only area where long distance family members can provide beneficial assistance to senior loved ones – and thus be considered caregivers. Some examples of this include:

- Family members of any age who understand personal technology, how to use it and what to do when something goes wrong can be very beneficial to and welcomed by senior loved ones. Having a family member who is patient and caring teach them how to use a smartphone, tablet or computer and the best way to set up and use programs, apps and even the web can make the learning and doing more appealing to seniors and thus increase the likelihood they're going to do it. Especially valuable is being a family member who can provide long distance tech support for when that printer doesn't print or the computing device simply isn't behaving as expected.

Kathy:

It can also have the added benefit of giving the family member providing “tech support” more opportunities to simply talk with a senior loved one, a plus for both.

Barry:

- Those who understand the language of cars and how they work can help seniors who don't to better get what they need at the right price when buying a new car or having a car repaired. In both situations, being able to speak knowledgeably and/or coach family members on the best way to proceed can lead to results that better match what is needed and give those family members credibility in the

eyes of the provider – or show them they have an expert in their corner – that can help dissuade a well, less than honorable provider from taking advantage of the senior.

Kathy:

- Are you one who is seen as good at organizing and making plans? Those skills can help senior loved ones keep track of their own lives. Those taking multiple medications might be able to use a way to make sure they take the right ones at the right times. Healthcare appointments and medical or insurance records can use the skilled hand of an organizer, as well as which service providers are going to the senior’s home at what times - - and when do we schedule the next appointment with the exterminator, getting the lawn mowed, cleaning the gutters and so much more. Don’t forget being connected remotely to their devices to know if they kept their doctors’ appointments, took their medications, checked their blood pressure or blood sugar and getting real time results for their health checks.

Barry:

- Having a family member they recognize as being knowledgeable in the financial markets can make it easier for a senior to ask for help with their retirement accounts or simply in managing their money. This is a sensitive area for many, which makes it one place where trust and privacy are critical, but also an area where a family caregiver can help keep senior loved ones on track financially and free from those who would take advantage of an older adult’s combination of financial nest egg and lack of knowledge to manage it wisely.

When You Can Visit Senior Loved Ones

Now living away from senior loved ones doesn’t need to mean you can only provide care from a distance, of course. There are many ways of providing care when visiting them infrequently, such as on vacation or around holidays.

As we often discuss, many seniors are living in homes that weren’t designed to meet the needs of aging bodies and minds. By listening to the challenges expressed by loved ones and simply looking around their homes – or by inviting an expert to do so – family members can determine what changes to a senior’s home will help them stay there more safely and comfortably. Many of those items can be done by handy family members over a vacation or when several family members get together over a long weekend. For those modifications requiring professional assistance, a vacationing family caregiver can help to select, task and even supervise a professional to assure the job is done right and as promised.

Kathy: When an in-home care provider is needed by a senior loved one, a visiting family member can help interview and select the provider to assure the right choice is being made. This can also start building familiarity between the care professional and family caregiver that can be beneficial in the monitoring the effectiveness of and getting updates from the provider once the family caregiver is back home. You can also set up other home care services such as home delivered meals, someone to clean and do laundry or to just be a companion.

Barry: Long distance family caregivers can plan visits with senior loved ones at a time to discuss those topics that may be better discussed in person. Examples of this include impressing upon seniors the importance of making and documenting their end of life decisions and selecting a healthcare power of attorney as we discussed in a recent post, and understanding and previewing the options should there comes a time the senior is unable to live at home, and to set up a network that can be used to assure a senior is safe and sound when the family caregivers are back in their distant home.

Kathy: Another way to provide care when visiting is to give a break to the family caregivers who are local and providing care to senior loved ones in ways that aren't possible from a distance. Giving the local family caregivers a chance to recharge and get respite helps them continue to provide a high level of care once you've gone home. Be supportive of the family nearby; don't use your visit pointing out what you think they should do instead of helping them actually do what needs to be done. No task is too small and will be appreciated by local family caregivers.

Barry: We know time is running long here, though we've just barely scratched the surface. Hopefully we've been able to provide insights you can use to determine how you can be a caregiver for a senior loved one from a distance. We'll talk more about that in the future, including that video Kathy mentioned. As we've been talking here I've realized it could really be useful.

Before we wrap up this segment, I want to include a reminder that long distance family caregivers just like those who are local, need to keep in mind their own needs as well as those for whom they care. Ignoring those needs will keep you from being at your best when providing care and thus able to give your best to others. Caring for the caregiver – yourself - is one of the important jobs of any family caregiver.

Well Kathy, you want to wrap us up with a quick tip today?

Kathy: Indeed I will! Barry as we talked in our first news item today, anemia could be linked to dementia, our quick tip today is:

How to Prevent Anemia

There are many health implications of having anemia including fatigue, loss of energy, pale skin, cold hands and feet, shortness of breath, irregular heart beat and dizziness.

Our seniors are at risk from the effects of anemia. And here are some tips to prevent that:

1. Eat foods rich in iron such as dried fruits, lean beef, dark green leafy vegetables, beans and iron fortified cereals.
2. Eat foods rich in folate such as citrus fruits, bananas, dark green leafy vegetables, and fortified grains.
3. Include foods containing vitamin B12 such as fortified cereals and soy products as well as meat and dairy foods.
4. Take vitamin rich foods with citrus foods which are good sources of vitamin C making it easier to absorb iron.
5. Ask your doctor if supplements would be helpful.
6. Check with your pharmacist to be sure your medications are not worsening anemia.
7. Be sure your doctor has checked for sources of bleeding that could require treatment.

Eating a healthy diet and talking with your doctor about your symptoms will help keep your senior's blood strong!

Barry: Thanks for that tip Kathy; I think that was a really good one. I liked the way that after you pointed out anemia as a problem, you came back and provided a way that caregivers can help their senior loved ones avoid anemia or at least overcome it.

Kathy: Well thank you, I hope it helps everyone.

Barry: And that's it for this episode of the Senior Care Corner Show folks. Glad you stopped by and hope you enjoyed it and found it helpful. Stop by and see us on a regular basis on SeniorCareConer.com, our Facebook page at Senior Care Corner or now on our YouTube Channel at Senior Care Corner. We've got some video tips there and when we do the follow up video for this podcast here, it will be out there as well. Keep coming back and seeing what we have to offer for family caregivers, we have a lot of resources, a lot of information out there now. Until we see you there, we hope you have a great day!