

How Technology Can Help if You Suddenly Become a Caregiver

By Laurie Orlov, founder of *Aging in Place Technology Watch*



You've seen the cycle with friends. Their parents became frail and now need help doing basic things around the house, scheduling their transportation, and keeping track of meds. Your friends are concerned about their parent's ability to live safely on their own. They tell you about technology that's helped them with caregiving. You listen politely and put it in the back of your mind. That's not your situation—not yet.

What We'll Cover:

- Caregiving can come as a surprise
- Technology can help family caregivers
- Helping your loved one avoid that dreaded move to senior living

First, Caregiving Can Come as a Surprise

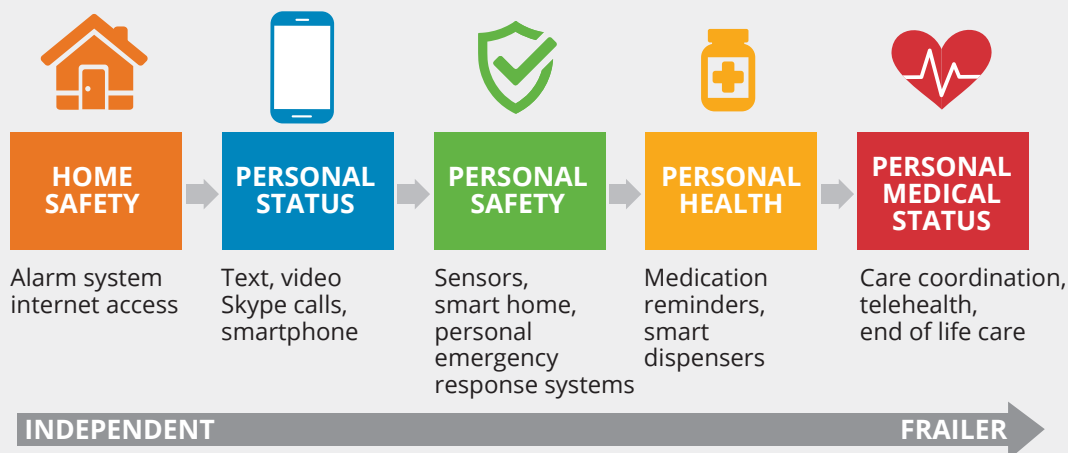
The kids are gone—and your house is your own again. But your father-in-law in Florida dies suddenly, leaving a wife who has never written a check or driven on her own. Or a family get-together reveals just how frail your parents have become—and you weren't aware or ready for how bad the situation has become. But your busy siblings rely on you to make decisions. Your aging family member needs you. Without training or preparation, you have become one of America's 34 million unpaid family caregivers. It's going to take lots of time and energy.¹



I have no doubt that tech of all kinds will play an ever-growing role in how we provide and receive care. The challenges posed by demographic change happen to be rising just as we come into possession of new tools and services that will make navigating the complexity of aging much easier.

Dr. Joe Coughlin
Director of the MIT AgeLab

How Technology Can Help As Caregiving Becomes More Complex



As care needs evolve, different technology categories become more important. At the beginning you may only want to know that your family member is safe at home. Over time, especially with those who show signs of dementia, you may want to introduce a wearable tracker that can be worn when your loved one goes out alone.

You May Not Even Consider Yourself a Caregiver

More than 80% of surveyed caregivers say they don't see themselves as caregivers.¹ But if they checked out the definition, they'd realize that it's talking about their situation: "Family caregivers are responsible for the physical, emotional, and, often, financial support of another person, who is unable to care for him/herself due to illness, injury, or disability." It's simple. Your family member cannot manage life without help.

Second, Technology Can Help Family Caregivers

Technology can be useful, depending on the status of your loved one's level of independence. It can help meet needs ranging from home safety to coordinating complex care.

Technology Can Help You Find Care

If you determine that you need some help with caregiving, there are two steps you'll likely need to take:

1. Assess your loved one's needs: Write down your loved one's needs, expectations, and any doctor's recommendations
2. Find a caregiver: There are a variety of ways to find a caregiver, including using agencies, registries, friends and family recommendations, or caregiving websites (see table below).

A life care manager can help navigate which care services can match their needs. Some care services, such as adult day/ respite centers, must be researched locally, along with meal delivery, housecleaning, and home repair.

Resources to Help You Find Care

Identifies types and sources of care, including agencies, registries, and considerations about each	Google "AARP How to Hire a Caregiver"
Robust listing of resources by care type, reviews	Caring.com
Independent in-home workers (sign up to search), reviews	Care.com
Independent in-home workers (sign up to see caregivers), reviews	Carelinx.com
Transportation options including remote and phone request, medical rides to doctor appointments	Google "AARP Transportation: What Caregivers Need to Know"

Tech Can Help You Manage Care Remotely

If your parents don't want to move, and they don't want a home-care worker in the house just yet, technology in the home can help. Once your parent's place is set up with high-speed internet and Wi-Fi, you can use technology to help manage care remotely. If your parent has a smartphone, they can have a smart doorbell app, such as Ring, in which they (or you, using the same app) can see who is at the door before answering it. In addition, technology can help you as the caregiver be better organized and more responsive to care needs.

Resources to Help You Manage Care Remotely

Get home set up with network, Wi-Fi, devices, including security cameras, smart home, and smart doorbells	Best Buy's Geek Squad, Assured Living, and HelloTech
Tech to remotely monitor in-home care	aeyesafe.com, alarm.com, restassured.com, lorex.com/pages/elderly-monitoring-solutions
Tech to organize caregiving tasks, coordinate calendar assignments with other family members, track medical info, track medications, and manage activities of daily living (ADLs)	For families: Lotsa Helping Hands, CareZone, CaringBridge, Drugs.com, and WebMd.com

Tech Can Enrich Care

The technology in the next table can help loved ones with hearing or vision problems. You'll find phone and computer displays for people with limited vision. For hearing problems, you'll find a broad array of hearing aids, sound amplifiers, and new hearing devices that are more affordable than traditional hearing aids. Plus, they're more attractive.

Voice-activated technology—like smart speakers and voice assistants—can be very helpful as well as engaging to an individual living alone. These devices can tell your loved one the time, play their favorite music, or even read them a Kindle book. And being able to turn on the lights or change the room temperature can make life easier for someone who has difficulty walking.

Resources to Help You Enrich Care

For limited vision	OrCam.com, esighteyeware.com, irisvision.com
For limited hearing	Hearing aids: Phonak Audéo Lumity, Signia Silk X, Widex Moment Over-the-Counter Hearing Aids: Jabra Enhance, Lexie, Eargo
For quality of life, including playing music, reading books, managing calendars, getting reminders, and checking in with family—all by using your voice and that of your loved one	Amazon Echo Google Nest Apple HomePod
For home automation—managing and controlling temperature, lights, home alarm and smart doorbells	Google "NYT How to make your house a smart home"

Third, Helping Your Loved One Avoid That Dreaded Move to Senior Living

Often, parents don't want to move to a nursing home. Family caregivers can hire workers to help with care, transportation, and even the Activities of Daily Living (ADLs). You can find tech changes that would make it a safer place, including automatic thermostat controls, stove shut-off products, and smart door alarms that show who's at the door before answering.

If your parents don't have a smartphone, maybe it's time to get one since they can control most of this technology. And designate a trusted friend or family member to help your parents learn how to use it. At some point, nursing home care may be needed, but technology can help push back that need.

Various people may be able to help caregivers determine when and if a loved one must move to a nursing home, including family members, a primary care doctor, a life care manager, a social worker, and an occupational therapist.

In the Beginning, You'll Probably Wonder if You Can Even Do This

Your focus on your loved one's needs will guide you past the "hair on fire" stage of caregiving by forming a deliberate plan of care. It can be stressful for all concerned, but you can do it.

If in-home equipment is necessary, you can get in-person or online help if needed to make sure it's set up correctly. You can ensure that automated alerts are directed to the right place, that cameras, if used, are operational and regularly checked, and that the other basics of in-home tech infrastructure are up to date and working.

Next Steps

1. Call a family meeting to assess your loved one's needs and expectations
2. Review tools like CareZone (managing healthcare) or Lotsa Helping Hands (family task sharing). Then create a plan of care together.
3. Determine what technology may be the most helpful in today's situation. Agree on who will do what to improve safety, care, and connection in the home.



Laurie Orlov is a tech industry veteran, writer, speaker, and founder of Aging in Place Technology Watch. She conducts market research, follows trends, and writes reports about technologies and services that enable boomers and seniors to remain longer in their home of choice.

Source:

¹ *Caregiving in the U.S. 2020*, National Alliance for Caregiving, 2020. Most recent data available.

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