

# Long Distance Traveling

by Suzann Ogland-Hand, PhD

“My mom has Alzheimer’s Disease, and I’m wondering about our travels to Florida. Should we bring her? Or should we leave her behind with extra supports? How do I go about making these decisions?”

You are not alone

Many adults find themselves faced with responsibilities of caring for aging relatives. It is helpful to know you are not alone. Situations about traveling and vacation frequently arise. As a caregiver, weigh decisions about traveling with a loved one who has cognitive impairment (e.g., dementia).

Stage of dementia

First, consider your loved one’s stage of dementia. As a caregiver, you know your family member’s capabilities. Trust your judgment and experience. Think about the last time you traveled together. How did that go? What types of things went well? What things would you want to not repeat, if possible? What have you learned from those experiences?

It likely goes without saying that it’s important to consider your mother’s wishes. Does she want to come along? Or would she prefer to have some ‘quiet time’ at home with a companion while you are gone? If you do decide to go this route, one local resource is Hope Behavioral Health’s Family Life Center. They have a 24-hour program, which includes a combination of overnight respite and adult day care (phone 616.456.1620; see Jim Woudstra’s article “Top Ten Tips for Caregivers” in this issue). Another option is to call on other family members or friends to provide extra support.

Think about your personal or family goals for the trip. How will her coming with you affect your other family members? These goals will greatly impact the decision of including your mother on your trip, or providing for her care at home while you are away. If you decide to go without mom on this trip, think of this time as respite time. You will be restored and refreshed from time away, and better able to address her caregiving needs. If you decide to include her, gear your expectations and plans to your mother’s skills.

Before you purchase tickets, consider including your mother’s physician and your physician in your discussions. Getting medical input and advice can be helpful.

Consider physical impairments

Consider any physical impairment that might impact your travel. How far can your mother walk? If she needs to use a wheelchair or a walker and you are traveling by public means, call ahead and make arrangements. Be prepared to

instruct the workers in its proper care (i.e., disassembly and reassembly), or to do it yourself.

If your loved one is visually impaired, you may need to provide your arm as a guide and escort. If your mom is hearing impaired, be sure her hearing aids are turned on to an appropriate volume and bring extra batteries.

**Simple plans are key**

Keeping your plans simple is important. Avoid fast-paced schedules or tight connecting flights. A direct flight is always preferred. The fewer the changes, the less likely your mom will become agitated. Some airlines provide a special rate for an escort or family caregiver. Bus trips and car trips are other options that may be more in line with your budget. Think through your individual situation.

Plan your route as carefully as you can, know about parking, elevators, stairs, etc. Leave plenty of time so you will not need to rush.

Plan ahead, anticipating delays, changes in schedules, weather, and your loved one's needs.

**Schedule breaks**

Taking breaks during a travel day is important. Standing up or stretching in an airplane can help – both for you and your loved one. If driving, consider stopping every two hours or so for a brief walk and stretch. Again, use your judgment and your experience. Be flexible.

Food is great for a break or snack-time. Try to maintain meal times to aid with consistency. Finger foods are very useful and appreciated, and can serve as a helpful break.

Schedule extra bathroom stops and consider protective briefs or incontinence pads. Enlist the help of a friend or family member (who is the same sex as your loved one) to accompany you to the airport or bus station to assist with bathroom needs. Many public buildings have “family-friendly” restrooms, which help with this issue and offer extra space.

**What to bring for the day**

Pack lightly. Count on needing to keep a hand free to help your mom. If you have packages or need several suitcases, consider shipping them in advance. For your health, avoid carrying heavy objects.

Bring along familiar activities. Pack a few magazines, a deck of cards, a wallet or purse to rummage through, or other activities your mom enjoys at home. This will help distract her from the change in environment and help calm her by providing familiar events.

### More resources

If you want more information about resources here in Kent County, the Caregiver Resource Network can help. Their web-page ([www.caregiverresource.net](http://www.caregiverresource.net)) can provide you with information about local programs and services, fact sheets, and a questionnaire about caregiver strain. Or call Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan (616.456.5664), HHS Health Options (616.285.2590), Senior Neighbors (616.459.6019), or Gerontology Network (616.771.9748) for more help. If you want more information specifically about dementia, call your local Alzheimer's Association (800.893.8365)

Send your caregiving questions to: Dr. Suzann Ogland-Hand, Caregiver's Corner, Pine Rest (MC), PO Box 165, Grand Rapids, MI 49501-0165, or email at [suzann.ogland-hand@pinerest.org](mailto:suzann.ogland-hand@pinerest.org).

### References:

- Alzheimer's Outreach: [www.zarcrom.com/users/alzheimers/t13.html](http://www.zarcrom.com/users/alzheimers/t13.html).
- Family Caregiver Alliance: [www.caregiver.org/factsheets](http://www.caregiver.org/factsheets).
- Gaines. [www.fibromama.com/cope.html](http://www.fibromama.com/cope.html).

Column written by Suzann Ogland-Hand, PhD, clinical geropsychologist at Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services, and member of Caregiver Resource Network, a partnership of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing information and support for family and professional caregivers within the community. Please send your caregiving questions to [suzann.ogland-hand@pinerest.org](mailto:suzann.ogland-hand@pinerest.org), and look for the Caregiver's Corner in the next edition of *Mature Lifestyles*.