

Parent Care: Healthy array of devices to check on aging parents

by Marsha_Kay_Seff

Big Brother wouldn't be anyone's first choice as a roommate. But increasingly, Big Brother, Little Brother and Cousin make it possible for aging parents to remain in their own homes longer.

KEEPING TABS - Dorothy Lerma of San Diego (upper left on video screen) and her mother, Maisie Martinez, keep connected via a video phone. CNS Photo by Scott Linnett. New technologies allow children to keep an eye and ear on their parents, ensuring their well-being from across the country or even outside the United States.

Most of you are familiar with the emergency-response necklaces that allow a wearer to summon help after a fall. A new model sends an automatic alert when a person is unconscious.

There are drug dispensers that remind people to take their meds, and equipment that alerts them when the mail comes. One gizmo sends e-mail and photos without a computer. There also are videophones and Webcams that allow you to eyeball your parent. With granny cams, children can keep track of their parents' movements from miles away.

Instead of cameras, there are networks of floor sensors to track mom or dad's every movement. Some systems are computerized and can compare the number and length of stays in each room to the usual pattern. There's also a teapot that lets adult children know what time a parent gets up, if tea usually is on the morning agenda.

A Korean company is toying with a robotic caregiver with voice recognition. According to AARP, the robot could place an order for meal delivery, set the table and even wash dishes. The mechanical servant also could give medication reminders, take blood pressure and send data to the doctor.

This brave new world might scare off many older folks, but some concede that their ability to remain home offsets the intrusion.

Adult children, already steeped in technology, are coming to depend on these gadgets for peace of mind. And most ask their parents' permission before installing anything.

San Diego's Dorothy Lerma stays in touch with her 75-year-old mom, Maisie Martinez, in New Mexico by Packet8 VideoPhone. For \$99 for each phone and monthly fees of \$25, the mother and daughter get unlimited calls. Dorothy says it would cost about \$20 more each month for basic high-speed Internet access if her mother didn't already have it. But users don't need a computer.

Before they purchased the phones, Lerma says, she wondered if her mother was feeling as well as she claimed. Now, the younger woman can check on her daily.

In fact, her mother, who was able to hook up the phone herself, now hits speed dial at least twice a day, just to chat. The screen is 5-by-5 inches, but the phone can be hooked up to a TV or computer screen.

"It's the best thing I ever had," Martinez told me by videophone. "I get to see my daughter every day." And if Mom needs privacy, she simply hits the privacy button.

Lerma, who became a rep for the company Escape International, says, "This has definitely brought us closer. I don't get to visit Mom often; now, I get to see her all the time."

Marsha Kay Seff is editor of The San Diego Union-Tribune's www.sandiegoeldercare.com, a Web site for older folks and their caregivers. She can be contacted at marsha.seff@uniontrib.com.

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