

Aging Happens: Planning now can prevent holiday travel problems later

By Ellen Waldman

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Many of you will be traveling this holiday to visit with older family members who live at a distance. You know this can be a stressful experience, especially during this season, so imagine how it might be for your older relative to be the traveler. This happens all too often without enough up-front planning to make it workable for everyone, especially the older person.

In a recent conversation with adult children and their parents, the children were surprised at how arduous it was for their parents to do a simple task. In the course of preparing for traveling, this can become quite burdensome, even if it used to be pleasurable for the parent. In another case, an older woman would not give up her wish to carry certain items in her purse, even after carry-on regulations were explained. You can just picture how stressed she would be in the airport when they stopped her from boarding with these much-needed items in hand.

Events like travel become more difficult if there is any degree of cognitive challenges. Here are some thoughts on how to make it much easier for them to travel. For additional info on this topic, call our local Alzheimer's Association (541-772-2230) and speak to Lori Stanton.

- Someone with early dementia shouldn't travel alone. No matter how clear they might be on any given day, the obstacles during travel can send them into a flurry of confusion.
- If you are traveling with them, be sure to stay together in the airport at all times. It's too easy to get turned around and lost when there are hundreds of people milling about.
- If you yourself get anxious, it's important to remain calm and not rush the person through security lines. It just makes things worse when rushing gets added into the picture. Fortunately, at the Medford airport, the lines are not too bad, and in many cases, they will offer help with situations like this.
- If possible, schedule flights early in the day. Many older people are ready to roll in the earlier hours, but get increasingly tired as the day wears on. It's also less likely you'll be marooned overnight in case of bad weather or other delays.
- If you can fly nonstop, definitely do that. Otherwise, leave plenty of time between connections for re-fueling on food, walking around, restroom stops, etc.
- You probably know this, but it's worth repeating. Carry medications with you, in the original bottles, if at all possible. Also bring an emergency supply bag as carry-on, because accidents and unexpected delays happen: pajamas, toiletry items, change of clothing, and important papers (advance directive, medication list, name of physicians, power of attorney, medical insurance cards.)
- If you've raised kids, you know it's important to pack snacks and provide water. But with older people, dehydration is a real risk. Reminders to use the bathroom just before the flight might mean they can stay seated and avoid the airplane bathroom. It's a bit crowded for two, if additional help is required.

- Things that occupy you might not have any appeal for them. Bring something for the person to do or look at like a puzzle book, a photo album or playing cards. For comfort, it's best to have a small blanket and/or a pillow.

If the person is flying alone, here are additional important considerations.

- Arrange with the airlines to provide wheelchair or motorized service from one terminal to another. This guarantees no one will get lost or overtired from walking too far.
- If they currently have a caregiver who knows them well, that person can help with packing their luggage and carry-ons ahead of time. In particular, they can make sure the meds are accounted for.
- Make arrangements with a shuttle service, like Cascade Shuttle (541-488-1998) or Yell Oh Taxi (541-973-0800), to take them from door to door.
- Last but not least, have help available for a much smoother return home. People are often very tired from trips, and will need additional help from in-home caregivers with meals, unpacking, etc. Even a mountain of laundry can overwhelm people, so this is an important part of planning. Leave these extra services in place for 2-3 days, until things settle down.

At some point, it's just so much easier if the older person stays at home, and family visits with them. Keep in mind that a shorter time together, with room for rest and quiet, can be more supportive. Most people want to put on a good face for their loved ones, but it takes its toll. There is real delight in not doing as much, with less commotion for everyone.