Visit, write, or call regularly.

One-on-one visits are wonderful, but phone calls, cards, and letters will also boost spirits and communicate that you care. Try to be regular with calls and visits; if a visit must be delayed or canceled, call immediately and speak directly to your relative if you can. When you visit, let your relative set the pace. Every visit doesn't have to be a talkathon; sometimes just your presence is the greatest comfort.

Encourage children in the family to stay in touch.

Include your children in visits when you can. Prompt young children to create pictures or cards for their relatives. If you live too far away for visiting, older children and teens can write and call. Talk with your children about what is happening. Without clear and age-appropriate explanations, youngsters may become scared, imagine that the situation is worse than it really is, or feel that they are somehow at fault. Honesty is essential, and adults should never convey false optimism when a relative (of any age) is chronically or terminally ill.

Treat an elderly person as an adult and an individual.

He or she should be listened to and taken seriously, especially about decisions that affect his or her life and health. Since the natural consequences of aging can be unfamiliar and frightening for younger people, it's a good idea to do some research about the aging process and, if possible, talk with a gerontologist or a physician who specializes in care for the elderly.

If your relative is in a health care facility, talk with the staff about his or her condition and progress.

Ask what you can do to assist. Treat all staff members with respect and courtesy, but be

observant. If you see or hear something troubling, raise the issue with senior staff or administrators as well as other family members.

Keep family members informed.

A family "phone tree" -- a plan by which people are assigned names to call -- is useful when news, such as a change in your relative's condition, needs to be communicated quickly.