Beleaguered Caregivers Getting Help from Apps

Jim Fitzgerald, Associated Press

As her mother and father edged toward dementia, Nancy D'Auria kept a piece of paper in her wallet listing their medications.

It had the dosages, the time of day each should be taken and a check mark when her folks, who live 10 miles away, assured her the pills had been swallowed.

"I work full time so it was very challenging," said D'Auria, 63, of West Nyack.

Now she has an app for that. With a tap or two on her iPhone, D'Auria can access a "pillbox" program that keeps it all organized for her and other relatives who share in the caregiving and subscribe to the app.

"I love the feature that others can see this," D'Auria said. "I'm usually the one who takes care of this, but if I get stuck, they're all up to date."

From GPS devices and computer programs that help relatives track a wandering

Alzheimer's patient to iPad apps that help an autistic child communicate, a growing number of tools for the smartphone, the tablet and the laptop are catering to beleaguered caregivers. With the baby boom generation getting older, the market for such technology is expected to increase.

The pillbox program is just one feature of a $3.99 app called Balance that was launched last month by the National Alzheimer Center, a division of the Hebrew Home at Riverdale in the Bronx.

"We thought there would be an opportunity here to reach caregivers in a different way," said David Pomerantz, executive vice president of the Hebrew Home. "It would be a way to reach people the way people like to be reached now, on their phone."

The app also includes sections for caregiving tips, notes for the doctor and the patient's appointments, plus a "learning section" with articles on aspects of Alzheimer's and an RSS feed for news about the disease.

Trackers are also important tools for Alzheimer's caregivers.

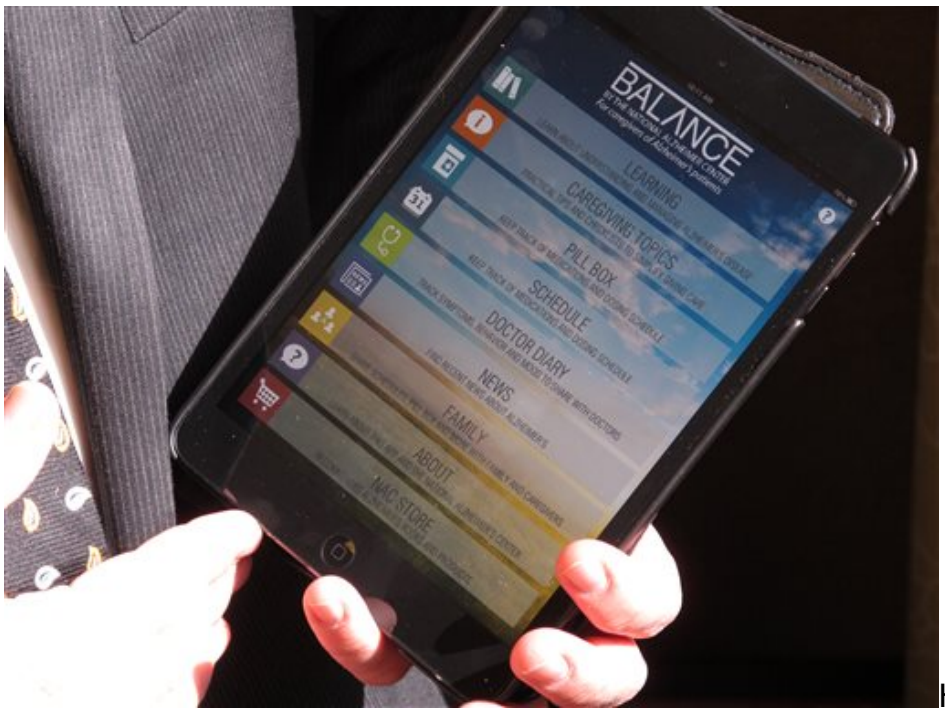
Laura Jones of Lighthouse Point, Fla., says she was able to extend her husband's independence for a year and a half by using a program called Comfort Zone.

"He was just 50 when he was diagnosed," she said.

Jones said she went to work so he would continue to get insurance coverage.

"Day care was not appropriate, home care was not affordable," she said. "Even when he stopped driving, he would ride his bike all over town, to the gym, for coffee, errands. He would take the dog for a walk and be out and about when he was alone and I was working."

Using Comfort Zone, which is offered by the Alzheimer's Association starting at $43 a month, she was able to go online and track exactly where he was and where he had been.



Her husband carried a GPS device, which sent a signal every five minutes. If Jones checked online every hour, she would see 12 points on a map revealing her husband's travels. She would also get an alert if he left a designated area.

Eventually, the tracking revealed that Jones' husband was getting lost.

"He would make a big funny loop off the usual route and we knew it was time to start locking down on him," she said.

Mended Hearts, an organization of heart patients and their caregivers, is about to start a program to reach caregivers by texting tips to their phones.

"We hope this will be the beginning of several patient- and caregiver-based texting programs that reach people where they are," said executive director Karen Caruth.

Lisa Goring, vice president of Autism Speaks, said tablets have been a boon to families with autistic children. The organization has given iPads to 850 low-income families. And the Autism Speaks website lists hundreds of programs — from Angry Birds to Autism Language Learning — that families have found useful.

Samantha Boyd of McConnellstown, Pa., said her 8-year-old autistic son gets very excited when the iPad is brought out.

"There's no way he'd be able to use a keyboard and mouse," she said. "But with the iPad, we use the read-aloud books, the songs, the flash card apps."

She said the repetitiveness and visuals help. "He catches a word and repeats it back. He says the name of a picture, and the iPad says it back."

Boyd said the iPad also works as a reward: "He likes to watch Netflix on it."

One of the most popular online tools for caregivers is one of the oldest: the message board, available all over the Internet and heavily used by caregivers of dementia and autism patients, who perhaps can't find the time for conventional support groups.

"It's a place for families to talk about the strengths and the accomplishments of their child with autism but also talk about some of the challenges and be able to find the support of other families," Goring said.

Some tools are not specific to a particular disease or condition.

CareFamily, which prescreens in-home caregivers and matches them to customers over the Internet, has online tools that let a family remotely monitor a caregiver's attendance, provide reminders about medications and appointments, and exchange care plans and notes via email, texting or phone.

"We're in the infancy of what technology can do for caregiving and it's only going to grow," said Beth Kallmyer, a vice president at the Alzheimer's Association.

But she cautioned that it's too soon to depend entirely on online tools.

"It's not a good fit for everybody," she said. "When you're looking at people impacted by Alzheimer's disease, including some caregivers, you're looking at an older population that might not be comfortable. We always have to remember technology is great — when it works."

Source URL (retrieved on *04/16/2014 - 12:37pm*):
http://www.mdtmag.com/news/2013/04/beleaguered-caregivers-getting-help-apps