The face staring back at me was both familiar and strange. I was on a video call with my father, and it felt like I was looking at a caricature of my future self; the nose and ears exaggerated beneath a cloud of snow-white hair.

“Can you see me OK?” he said. “Is this thing working?”

For many of us, video calls using apps like Skype and FaceTime are old hat. But for my father, it was a brave new world. This is a man whose fingers had never touched a computer keyboard or a smartphone. And frankly, at age 93, he had no desire to start.

It used to be that trying to help your parents safely age in place (the term for staying in their own home as they get older) was stressful. Now technology can make this life stage easier for you and them.

BY DAN TYNAN
Then I sent him the grandPad, a simplified tablet designed for seniors who have yet to embrace the digital age. Within a day, my father had taken his first selfie. Within two, he had become addicted to FreeCell, a computer game, and had more or less gamely waded into the World Wide Web, though he confided to me that he didn’t much trust it.

Using the grandPad’s camera, he gave me a virtual tour of the Florida condo he shares with his second wife. I did the same with my house. Then I introduced him to my son Cole, age 21. We talked about whether he looked like a less jowly, more handsome version of me.

For 28 years, my father and I didn’t speak. (That’s a story for another time.) So he had never met my son, daughter or ex-wife. But now I touch base with my dad every few days via the grandPad. And we’re hardly the only ones using technology to bridge the span of years and miles.

By 2030, one out of five Americans will be 65 or older. As has been widely reported, this cohort will place an enormous burden on our health care and retirement systems. It will also likely put an equally large logistical and mental strain on the generation charged with taking care of them.

The good news: Tech can help. There are devices that monitor elder health 24/7 and alert you when there’s a problem. And apps that make sure someone’s always available to drive dad to the doctor. And even senior-friendly interactive robots. Yes, they’re a thing now.

Everything is already on the market, with the goal of helping our parents live fuller, more independent lives—and better yet, to give us at least some relief from worry.

USEFUL GADGETS

Tech products specifically geared to seniors are usually modified for eyes that aren’t as sharp or hands that aren’t as steady as they used to be. They can give you and your parents greater peace of mind.

GREATCALL LIVELY MOBILE

If you want one-button access to GreatCall health and safety services without a smartphone, this 2 x 1.5-inch gadget is the ticket. Designed to be worn on a lanyard around the neck or clipped to a belt, the Lively Mobile features a single button that instantly connects to a highly trained live operator. The built-in accelerometer measures motion so it can detect if its wearer falls and call an operator automatically; an internal GPS provides the location in case emergency responders need to be summoned.

COST: $50 for the unit, plus $20 to $35 a month for services. Greatcall.com
GRANDPAD
Tech created specifically for seniors is often either too confusing or too limited, but the grandPad gets it right. This 8-inch tablet features large, clearly labeled icons for video and voice calls, photos, email, music, games, news, weather and search. Only people on the approved contacts list can send messages—meaning no worries about strangers or scammers bothering your folks. Best of all, there’s a live support person on call 24/7 in English, Spanish and Chinese to help them troubleshoot (so you don’t have to try).

COST
After a 30-day free trial, from $49 a month, which includes the tablet and a 4G wireless connection. Getgrandpad.com

UNALIWEAR KANEGA WATCH
It’s entirely voice-driven: no tiny screen to squint at or pin-sized buttons to press. The Kanega can remind seniors to take their medications, guide them back home if they become lost on a walk and contact emergency services if they fall. Unlike most smartwatches from companies like Apple and Samsung, the Kanega doesn’t require a smartphone.

COST
$50 activation fee, then $60 a month for watch, cellular plan and 24/7 medical monitoring. Unaliwear.com

GREATCALL JITTERBUG SMART
This smartphone differs from your average Android handset in a few senior-friendly ways. The homescreen is simpler, with large fonts and icons that make it easier to call, text, take pictures and play games. Optional health and safety services turn the phone into a lifeline. The 5Star app lets seniors tap a single button to talk to a highly trained live operator, who can determine if they need emergency assistance. Urgent Care connects them to medical pros 24/7, and MedCoach reminds them to take their medications.

>>> BRAVE NEW WORLD
Getting mom and dad a smartphone or tablet doesn’t do anyone much good if they don’t know how to use it. If you lack the time or patience to teach the basics and can’t recruit grandkids to do it, consider signing them up for classes.

1 AARP TEK Workshops (aarp.org/learnat50plus) cover everything from operating a smartphone to on-line safety in 60- to 90-minute classes. Workshops are offered in 34 markets nationwide, says Jean Setzfand, senior VP of programs. Best of all, they’re free to any senior, whether or not they’re AARP members.

2 Local organizations, like Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) in New York City and Senior Surf in San Francisco, offer tech classes. Using Google to search is the easiest way to find one in your area.

3 The Oasis Institute (oasisnet.org/connections) offers classes in 30 cities and recently launched a YouTube channel to teach adults a range of tech skills, from navigating Facebook to mastering Excel. Individual classes start at around $30, says Amy VanDeVelde, National Technology Program manager.

4 If your parents need tech help and can’t find a class nearby, try the local library or senior center, suggests VanDeVelde. “Public libraries and senior centers offering tech classes are the nation’s help desk,” she says. “These professionals provide a wealth of knowledge to keep seniors connected.”