

**2013, Taking Care of Your Parents in “Old Age”:
Managing Stress in The Sandwich Generation
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

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Those retirement years often feel like you have traded paid work for non-paid work, especially when you are one of those sixty five million unpaid caregivers in this country. It is often said “life is what happens while you are busy making plans.” Dreams about those retirement years as relatively carefree, spent fishing, traveling, spending time with grandkids and just doing nothing, have not come true. While you were making plans of how you get to enjoy your time on your own terms, your parents were aging. Now you find that your time is still not your own as their needs have taken your time, attention, and energy. You may even be sandwiched in between the needs of the previous generation and needs of your own adult children.

Primary or ancillary caretaking of others is stressful business. You are not only trying to manage your own household and financial responsibilities and chores, but trying to be responsible for maintaining the same infrastructure for others. Many baby boomers report that they are stretched beyond their skills and resources.

The first and foremost things that you can do manage these “unmanageable” situations is to change up how you approach self-care. If there is nothing left of you, there is nothing left to take care of others. When you are all used up, you are no help to others. Caregiving is stressful and playing ostrich, hoping for the best, is not taking care of yourself and ultimately not appropriately taking care of your significant other.

Basic self-care involves taking action on a daily, sometimes hourly basis in doing what you have to do to stay healthy. It involves getting adequate rest and nutrition. It involves daily physical exercise and having time away from the people for which you provide care. You must make time to “wind down”, to decompress, to relax, and to enjoy time with other family members and friends. Asking for help is crucial. If you don’t know how to ask for help or if you have any kind of dysfunctional beliefs that you tell you that you “shouldn’t” have to ask for help, it is time to work through those and develop this essential skill.

Take stock of your resources. Some communities have more infrastructure for care and support of the aging population than others. Check the newspapers, churches, hospitals, and organizations such as United Way to find out what is available in your community. There may be adult day care, Meals on Wheels, bus services for elderly and/or

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handicapped, caregiver support groups, senior citizens centers activities and numerous other options in your own community. There is no shame in utilizing the support available.

If you are still working, identify any benefits and resources available to you from your place of employment. Let your supervisors know what is going on. Negotiate for flexibility in scheduling, in leave time, get information on the Family and Medical Leave Act, and take your coworkers up on their offers to assist you.

You don't have to do everything yourself. Identify significant other people in the life of your loved one. Don't be afraid or too proud to ask other family members and friends to help out. When people offer, take them up on it. Tell them concretely what you would like them to do to help. Much of the time, when other family members do not step up, they don't know what to do, how to do it, or are concerned that taking action will step on the toes of those on the front line. Tell them what is needed and work with them to engage them in a scheduled routine of assistance.

Keep in mind that caregiving is often a thankless pursuit. While you might think that anyone “needs” your help would be grateful for that help, it is not necessarily true. Aging people who need assistance, tend to be stressed out as well. They generally don't want to be a burden, a financial drain, or dependent. They often have a certain amount of denial about the reality of their limitations and want to believe that they can still do things that they can no longer safely do. They want to get out and about on their own, go grocery shopping, get their hair done, or tend to their gardens. They want to do these things when they believe they have the energy to do them. They don't want to wait for you to make time to do them according to your own schedule. They want to do the things that we simply take for granted daily. They get frustrated and anxious about not being able to do so. Their sense of identity may shift as they decline and they get angry with themselves for not being able to do what they once could. Anger often comes out indirectly and you may get the brunt of it. Try to put yourself in your parent's shoes.

Keep your perspective. You want your aging parent(s) to have as high a quality of life as is possible in their final years. There will ultimately be an end to your caregiving. The decline of aging parents is often gradual, with a steady loss of abilities over time.

It is crucial to do your homework to learn about the important issues and symptoms to watch out for, and to seek advice about when and how to intervene. You can approach aging parent issues with pro-active problem solving when you know what to expect and what your resources are. Keep in mind that you are not your parent's only resource. Even if you are an only child, your parent probably has doctors, pharmacists, an

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insurance company, a church, siblings, friends, neighbors and other significant people in his life. Enlist the aid of these people as appropriate. With your siblings, don't accept excuses for their not helping. Work with them to identify what they can contribute to your parent's care. Hold family conferences to keep all “caregivers” informed and engaged. Put together a list of doctors, pharmacies, insurance company, neighbors, friends, etc. with phone numbers and contact people so that everyone engaged in caretaking has the same information and can easily access it. Caregivers can do some brainstorming about how to spread out the responsibilities of caretaking. Utilize new technology as appropriate, like a medic alert or a “Granny-cam”. Needs change and should be assessed frequently. A number of levels of intervention may be appropriate over time. Identify any decisions to be made in the event of changing circumstances. Examples might include issues like the "end of driving", need for placement outside the family home, or hospice care. Sometimes changes in a parent's circumstances are abrupt and require bigger changes in the parent's life, for his own safety.

Whatever challenges you face as a caregiver, in order to act in your parent's best interests you must take care of yourself. Managing caregiver stress should be a top priority. You will be challenged with dealing with any unresolved emotional issues with your parent and may need help with sorting through those feelings. Don't be afraid to seek the help of a good psychotherapist. Long standing resentments and hurt feelings can get in the way of being effective with your parent and with making decisions that allow you to take care of your own needs. It is important to avoid isolation, to develop a support system of your own, and to practice assertive communication with everyone involved.

Good communication can go a long way in problem solving around caretaking issues. When you are able to communicate effectively, not only with your aging parent, but with siblings and other caregivers, you are more able to avoid emotional triangles that set family members against each other. With assertive communication you can set and maintain boundaries, assign tasks, and deal with conflicts as they come up. It is equally as important to be able to communicate with your spouse about your needs and to allow him or her to be a primary support person for you.



If you find that you and your spouse are at a loss for topics of conversation, the "Honey Jar", can assist most couples with “breaking the ice” to begin to once again share themselves with each other. The “Honey Jar” is a conversation starter for couples. It consists of 250 sentence stems, each one serving as an open-ended prompt to discuss one of a number of individual or couple subjects. It was designed and “field

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tested” for couples in long standing and well established marriages. When it seems like you have run out of things to talk about, it can assist in generating conversation about oneself and about the relationship in a non-threatening way. Each numbered item is a sentence stem that can spark the revelation of information forgotten and as yet unknown about you or your significant other. The sentence stems are random in subject and depth. ***This is a digital product in a PDF format that you download directly onto your computer.***



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