

## **When Your Sandwich Generation Marriage Feels Flat and Lifeless**

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

If you are in the age group referred to as “the Sandwich Generation” you know what it means to be spending your time and energy on assisting your aging parents and in-laws while juggling the continuing demands of parenting late adolescent and “adult children”. This is also a time when you are thinking about your own retirement and trying to figure out how to accomplish it and keep from eating cat food on a regular basis. Your resources of time, energy, and money are constantly being used to take care of people other than you and your spouse.

You may be working together as a team with your spouse to accomplish this nearly impossible balancing act. Or, you may be missing your spouse, since by the time you settle in at bedtime, you’re brain dead and unable to have a reasonable conversation, much less engage in passionate sex. You are just as likely to be dealing with your stress and unilaterally and blaming or criticizing your spouse for not being more helpful. As you individually problem solve, you may have difficulty effectively asking for help. You may not even be able to recall the last time you really had a conversation with your spouse about anything but “care giving”. Your marriage may seem flat and lifeless.

You may believe that your spouse “should” know what needs to be done, what you want and need, and how you want to receive it. Even when you have been married for 30 years, chances are that your partner’s mind reading and fortune telling abilities are inconsistent at best, and are probably non-existent. Couples often have unreasonable expectations of each other when they most need and want each other’s help, acceptance, and understanding. After all, this is one of the most stressful times in your life.

There are some things you can do to restore a sense of well being and balance to your life by uncovering your most powerful stress management resource – your marital relationship. When two marital partners care for each other’s health and peace of mind, they seek to provide emotional support, to be considerate of each other’s time and energy, to provide supportive services for each other, and to put their partner first sometimes.

To be able to provide these things to each other, partners communicate and problem solve about the tasks that they are dealing with. With boomerang adult children moving back in, they identify appropriate boundaries and expectations and communicate those clearly with the adult children. If they have irresponsible adult children that they are enabling, they deal with that problem head on, deciding on a course of action together and reinforce each other’s contribution to the solution. If they have parents who are no longer really able to adequately care for themselves at home, they take action to get all the significant people on the same page so that they can problem solve as a team for the sake of the health and well being of the aging parents. They back each other up. They assist each other in working through any guilt and sadness about the necessity of putting aging parents in nursing homes or other alternatives that may not be exactly what is desired.

This is probably not what you planned. This is the time in life that you may have been looking forward to for a long time. Maybe what you had in mind was being in control of your schedule and activities, of finally time to spend with your spouse, and having your house to yourself. Maybe you have been dreaming of a time when you could be spontaneous with intimacy with your spouse, with taking a road trip on a whim, or being able to take off and travel at a moment's notice, or maybe even, just sitting around and reading or playing golf. Folks in the sandwich generation, even the retired, seem to find themselves busier than at other times in their lives. Those child-centered and work/career centered whirlwind of activities can seem comatose in comparison to these days.

To reclaim your life and your balance, re-center yourself by refocusing on your marriage. Being able to ground yourself in the loving embrace of your partner who loves, understands, and accepts you, makes all the difference in managing stress and putting the tasks demanded of you each day, into the proper perspective.

To focus on your marriage, utilize the support systems in your family, in your church, and in your community. There are probably more resources available than you know. You don't have to do everything yourself. Make the time for your marriage by taking up a sport, a craft, or a hobby that you can do together. Go on dates. Go out with friends. Turn off the television. Play your CDs; listen to satellite radio; get up and dance. Sit and talk to each other—everyday. Just the two of you. If you don't seem to have much to say, utilize a communication exercise like "The Honey Jar" to get you started. Carve out the time, and just do it. You will be rewarded.

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