

Taking Care of Your Parents in “Old Age”: Managing Stress in The Sandwich Generation

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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. Sometimes, life gets in the way of your retirement plans. Dreams about carefree retirement years, fishing, traveling, spending time with grandkids, and just doing nothing have not come true. While you were planning how to enjoy your time on your 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 find yourself sandwiched between the needs of the previous generation and the needs of your adult children.

The Stress of Caregiving:

Primary or part-time caretaking of others is a stressful business. You are not only trying to manage your household and financial responsibilities and chores but also trying to be responsible for maintaining the same infrastructure for others. Many baby boomers are fearful of being stretched beyond their skills and resources.

Prioritizing Self Care:

The first and foremost thing needed to manage these "unmanageable" situations is to change how you approach self-care. If nothing is left of you, nothing is left to care for others. When you are all used up, you are no help to others. Caregiving is stressful, and hoping for the best without caring for yourself does not help in caring for your significant other.

Essential self-care involves taking action on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis in doing what you have to do to stay healthy. It consists in getting

adequate rest and nutrition. Daily physical exercise and time away from the people you care for are essential. Making time to "wind down," decompress, relax, and enjoy time with other family members and friends is as important as asking for help. If you don't know how to ask for help or have any dysfunctional beliefs that you tell yourself that you "shouldn't" have to ask for help, it is time to work through those and develop this essential skill.

Tapping into Community Resources:

Take stock of your resources. Some communities have more infrastructure for the 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 the aged or handicapped, caregiver support groups, senior citizens center activities, and numerous other options in your community. There is no shame in utilizing the support available.

Leveraging Personal Benefits and Resources:

Identify any personal benefits and resources. Let your work supervisors know what is going on. Negotiate for flexibility in scheduling and leave time, get information on the Family and Medical Leave Act, and take your coworkers up on their offers to assist you.

Seeking Help from Others:

You don't have to do everything yourself. Identify significant other people in the life of your loved one. Overcome fear or false pride about asking other family members and friends to help. When people offer, take them up on it. Tell them concretely what you would like them to do to help. Often, when other family members do not step up, they do not know what to do or 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 assistance routine.

Dealing with the Emotional Challenge:

Keep in mind that caregiving is often a thankless pursuit. While you might think anyone who "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 fear being a burden, a financial drain, or a dependent. They often have a certain amount of denial about their limitations and want to believe they can still do things they can no longer safely do. They want to get out and about, 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 often need more patience to wait for you to do them according to your schedule. They want to do the things that we 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 for being unable to do what they once could. Anger often comes out indirectly, and you may get the brunt. Try to put yourself in your parent's shoes.

Keeping Perspective on Aging Parents:

Keep your perspective. You want your aging parents to have as high a quality of life as 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.

Utilizing External Resources:

It is crucial to do your homework to learn about the critical issues and symptoms to watch out for and to seek advice about when and how to intervene. You can approach aging parent issues proactively when you know what to expect and have identified your resources. 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 insurance company, a

church, siblings, friends, neighbors, and other significant people in their life.

Effective Communication and Planning:

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 companies, neighbors, friends, etc., with phone numbers and contact people so that everyone involved in caretaking has the same information and can easily access it.

Adapting to Changing Circumstances:

Caregivers can brainstorm 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. The condition of an aging parent may warrant several different levels of intervention over time. Identify any changes in required decisions in changing circumstances. Examples might include issues like the "end of driving," the need for placement outside the family home, or hospice care. Sometimes, changes in a parent's circumstances are abrupt and require more significant changes in their life for their safety.

Caring for the Caregiver:

Whatever challenges you face as a caregiver, you must care for yourself to act in your parent's best interests. Managing caregiver stress should be a top priority. Dealing with unresolved emotional issues with your parent will be challenging, and you may need help sorting through those feelings.

A good psychotherapist can help. Long-standing resentments and hurt feelings can get in the way of being effective with your parent and making decisions that allow you to care for your needs. Avoid isolation, develop a

support system, and practice assertive communication with everyone involved.

Assertive Communication and Boundaries:

Good communication can go a long way in problem-solving around caretaking issues. When you can 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 select and maintain boundaries, assign tasks, and deal with conflicts as they come up.

Involving the Spouse in the Caregiving Journey:

Your spouse is a support person in this whole enterprise, whether helping on the front line or being there for you. It is equally as essential to communicate with your spouse about your needs and allow them to support you. Remember also that they need time and attention too.

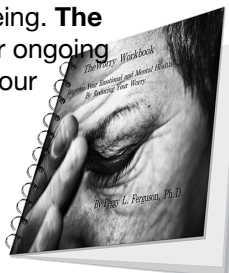
Caregiving for aging parents requires a delicate balance between self-care and fulfilling responsibilities. In this brief guide, we looked at the challenges faced by millions of unpaid caregivers in our country, exploring stress management, the crucial role of self-care, and leveraging community resources. From tapping into personal benefits to seeking help

from others and dealing with emotional challenges, these practical strategies guide caregivers, emphasizing the importance of effective communication, collaboration with external resources, and adapting to changing

circumstances. This information aimed to empower caregivers to maintain their well-being while ensuring a high quality of life for their aging parents.

When dealing with the challenges of caregiving for aging parents, you must prioritize your mental well-being. **The Worry Workbook** helps you to unravel the complexities of worry, fostering self-awareness, and providing practical solutions. Real-life examples and powerful worksheets provide a clear path to managing anxiety. This workbook explores the impact of thoughts, feelings, and lifestyle on stressors, offering recommendations for lasting well-being. **The Worry Workbook**, an invaluable resource for ongoing discovery, personal growth, and managing your current challenges.

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