

Caregiver's Corner Column (August 2011)

Caregivers Feeling Sandwiched at Back to School Time

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Caregivers sandwiched between parents (or even grandparents) and school-age children face a high degree of pressure in coping with the demands of competing priorities. As if the day-to-day routine weren't stressful enough, there are periods throughout the year that can be particularly challenging. "Back to School" season is one such time. Assuring that the kids start the new school year on the right foot can be stressful and hectic.

The added responsibility of caring for an elder loved one can be enough to push the anxiety level to the limit, potentially putting the caregiver's own health and well being at risk. How do you create a realistic balance between meeting the needs of your family, your career, your aging loved ones, and your own quality of life?

There are several strategies to consider:

1. Share the load – The old adage "Many hands make light work" couldn't be truer for caregivers. Even in large families, it's not uncommon for one person to assume the majority of the burden in caring for a loved one. An important part of creating balance in life is equitably delegating caregiver tasks to everyone concerned. If siblings are unavailable, consider calling on extended family, church members, or friends for help. In most cases, these people are typically happy to be of assistance and are only waiting to be asked.
2. Plan the work, work the plan – Make a list of everything that needs to get done, and identify which tasks can be delegated. Give as much detail as needed for someone else to complete the task. Be sure to include how much time is required and a deadline for completing it. It's much easier to enlist the support of others if they understand exactly what needs to be accomplished, and how much time is involved. With the game plan written and the team assigned their roles, the caregiver is free to focus on other important responsibilities.
3. Schedule intentionally – The author Brian Tracy observed that "our greatest resource is time". An important aspect of working the plan is having enough time in each day to meet the various demands. Even informal activities such as shopping for school supplies or playing catch with the kids can be built into the schedule. The key to this strategy is to stick to the schedule as much as possible. Of course, things happen and schedules must be changed. As long as those tasks are not dropped all together, that's O.K.
4. Involve the kids – As parents, it is natural to want to shelter our children from worry, pain or the unhappy reality that an elderly loved one can no longer manage on their own. But in our desire to be protective, we might overlook a wonderful opportunity for growth,

bonding, and family-togetherness. Children possess a wonderful capacity for caring when given the chance.

5. Take time for YOU – Caregivers are among those at greatest risk of experiencing health concerns of their own. The stress and constant demands of a “sandwich lifestyle” can take a toll if not managed appropriately. A good diet, regular exercise, and adequate sleep are all keys to a healthy lifestyle. Maintaining interests and hobbies that help you unwind is equally important. Try to save time in your schedule to get together with friends and to take breaks on a regular basis.
6. Connect with resources – Here in West Michigan, we are lucky to be extremely well served with many resources options that are dedicated to providing the help and assistance we need to provide balance in our lives. Organizations including the Caregiver’s Resource Network, the Area Agency on Aging, the Alzheimer’s Association, and many others provide information, education, support, and a network of allied service providers in our community. They are an invaluable resource for supporting caregivers!

Being a member of the Sandwich Generation means managing multiple, often conflicting, demands. Successfully finding balance requires flexibility from all concerned, and a willingness to embrace creative solutions. By reaching out, organizing, and intentionally planning for work AND play, this season can be a positive one for all involved.

Caregiver’s Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American’s Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.