

Employed Caregivers

by Suzann Ogland-Hand, PhD

“I manage a lot of roles. My folks are getting on in years, and I sometimes help them coordinate doctor’s appointments and getting groceries. I also work, and value my job a lot. And I’ve got my own family’s needs to consider. Sometimes I worry...do I have enough time to take care of everyone’s needs? How supportive is my employer going to be if my parents have more needs? How am I going to get all my work done?”

You are not alone

Many employed adults find themselves faced with responsibilities caring for aging relatives and friends. Families, in spite of changes in social expectations and employment requirements, want to continue the tradition of caring for each other. And many employed adults do not have the option of leaving work to provide care for a parent or other aging relative. You are not alone.

Your role as an employed caregiver often entails managing multiple roles: to your parents, to your employer, to your husband and your children, and to yourself. This juggling can provide a source of stress – both at work and at home. On the positive side, however, some caregivers report that work provides them not only with financial resources, but also an enhanced sense of competence and respite from caregiving.

Many caregivers do not choose this caregiving role; rather the role grows slowly, with the caregiver taking on more and more responsibility as their loved one has more difficulty. In many families, one individual assumes most of the responsibility. So employed caregivers are at risk for feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and becoming depressed. Common concerns for caregivers are: feeling guilty for not being able to manage everything, feeling alone, feeling angry that other family members don’t help out more, financial problems, job performance problems and personal health problems.

Talk with your employer

It’s important to talk with your employer about your specific caregiver situation. Don’t wait for a crisis, but rather, be straightforward with your supervisor about the nature and extent of your situation. Together, you can develop strategies to help meet the demands of your job. It’s important to recognize stress before it impacts your work performance, and think about how to ask clearly for specific things that would help you in your caregiving role. Accessing services through your Employee Assistance Program, if one is available, can be an additional source of support.

Self-care at work

At work, set priorities for yourself, and stay on task. One person can't do it all, and setting priorities will help each day proceed more smoothly. Recognize that priorities will change from day to day. Stay flexible.

Volunteer for projects that fit your needs. Be proactive in asking for assignments, which can offer you greater flexibility. Try to keep up with work projects and notes about projects so that if others must cover for you, the transition will be smooth.

Consider altering your shift or work hours. Perhaps come in early, or leave later. And take your lunch break.

Rearrange commitments creatively

Scheduled medical/dental/eye appointments with your aging loved one first thing in the morning. This may help avoid prolonged waits in the waiting room, meaning less time away from work. Or schedule several appointments in one day, if possible.

Be educated

If a parent or spouse suffers from a particular disease – heart disease, arthritis, diabetes, dementia – learn all you can now about the disease, and learn what a caregiver can expect as the disease progresses. Good online resources are readily available, including fact sheets from the Family Caregiver Alliance (see www.caregiver.org/factsheet) or detailed information from Web MD (<http://my.webmd.com>).

Avoid depression and physical health problems

Be good to yourself. Love, honor and value yourself. You are doing a very hard job and you deserve some quality time, just for you. Try not to carry guilt feelings, but rather deal with them. Watch out for signs of depression, and don't delay in getting professional help.

Self-care strategies are important, too. Try to use humor. Take time to exercise. Get plenty of sleep. Try to make reasonable food choices. At home and at work, accept help when people make the offer. Be specific when asking family members for help with household chores and tasks. Have a family meeting to discuss shared responsibilities.

It's important to remember that caregiving is a highly individual experience. Staying well will not only help you as a person, but will also help you preserve your work relationships. As an employed caregiver, you need to listen to your own feelings and find help when necessary.



More resources

If you want more information about resources here in Kent County, the Caregiver Resource Network is a great place to turn for help. Their web-page (www.caregiverresource.net) can provide you with information about local programs and services, fact sheets, and a questionnaire about caregiver strain. Or call Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan (616.456.5664), HHS Health Options (616.285.2590), Senior Neighbors (616.459.6019), or Gerontology Network (616.771.9748) for more help.

Send your caregiving questions to: Dr. Suzann Ogland-Hand, Caregiver's Corner, Pine Rest (MC), PO Box 165 Grand Rapids, MI 49501-0165, or email at suzann.ogland-hand@pinerest.org.

References:

- Rosscare. www.rosscare.org/guide/plan.
- Neal & Wagner. www.aoa.dhhs.gov/carenet/issue-briefs0302/fin-Neal-Wagner.html.

Column written by Suzann Ogland-Hand, PhD, clinical geropsychologist at Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services, and member of Caregiver Resource Network, a partnership of Kent County organizations dedicated to providing information and support for family and professional caregivers within the community. Please send your caregiving questions to suzann.ogland-hand@pinerest.org, and look for the Caregiver's Corner in the next edition of Mature Lifestyles.