

The Sandwich Generation

by Hanni Epp, MA

Has this happened to you?

“My Mom called at the office to ask if I could pick up her medicine this afternoon on my way home. It’s a problem for me because I have to pick up my daughter from school after her theater group, and Mom’s pharmacy is on the other side of town. At rush hour, this could take more than two hours. I’m feeling squeezed! Bob C.”

Bob is a 49-year-old man with a family and a full-time job as an accountant. He is also his mother’s caregiver, and although she still lives independently, she calls more and more often, asking for help. Bob’s wife also works, and although they both are able to flex their time to some extent, there never seems to be enough time for everything, especially themselves.

You are not alone...

Here are a few statistics about what has come to be called “The Sandwich Generation”:

- About 44% of Americans between the ages of 45 and 55 have aging parents or in-laws as well as children under age 21.
- 64% of caregivers are employed full-time or part-time. That translates into more than 14 million US workers caring for aging family members.
- An estimated 7 to 10 million adult children are caring for their parents from a long distance.

Bob's story continued...

"I feel like the filling in the middle of a sandwich. On one side, my Mom is depending on me to help her cope with the things she can't do for herself, like her finances and driving her to the doctor. She would like me to call her every day, too. She was so good to me as I was growing up, I feel guilty that I can't do everything she seems to expect of me.

On the other side, I have children who take up as much time and money as I can give them. They have so many activities and need to be driven everywhere. What with driving, keeping the refrigerator filled and doing the laundry, my wife and I are exhausted. I can't remember the last time we had a quiet evening together."

What are the issues?

Eldercare has become a big issue, because people are living longer and suffering more chronic illnesses than in the past. Some of those older adults need support, whether they live at home, with family or in a facility. Most of that support comes from family, such as adult children.

Many adult children are trying to balance three major responsibilities:

1. Raising their own children
2. Leading their own lives, including full-time jobs
3. Helping their aged parents

These days, there are many four-generation families. Those in their 50s or 60s may be sandwiched between aging parents, adult children and

grandchildren. Or, those in their 30s and 40s, with young children, may have aging parents and grandparents.

Juggling these responsibilities leads to a serious drain on the adult child's time, energy and finances, which in turn affects the entire family. Trying to find balance becomes even more difficult when you consider that:

- The average length of time spent on caregiving is about eight years, with about one-third providing care for 10 or more years.
- On average, caregivers help with expenses for two to six years and spend a total of \$19,525 in out-of-pocket expenses. This often comes at a time when children are in college, and the caregiver is starting a retirement savings account.

Making the adjustment...

Few people have the luxury of planning in advance for their role as caregiver. But, the fact is that you are going to be spending time, both mentally and physically, and that's going to drain you personally. It may also affect your ability to earn a living. Self-care will be of critical importance. Caring for yourself on a daily basis will not only keep you healthy, it will make you a better caregiver!

If you have suddenly become a caregiver, begin planning how you will make adjustments. Can you arrange to work a flextime schedule? What about exercising regularly with a friend, taking care of both physical and social needs? Take a realistic look at your time, your energy and your finances, and start

thinking about where you can make some changes. Then begin to look at how others can help you.

- Learn about your loved one's illnesses, so that you know what to expect. Find out what kind of care will be required, and what kind of help you will need to provide that care.
- I said this last month, but it's worth repeating: Do not try to do everything yourself! Talk with family members and friends about the care needed, and ask for their help. Be specific!
- Check with your employer to see if any eldercare benefits are offered.
- Research how needed care will be paid for. Which available insurances and/or government programs pay for what? Do not assume that Medicare or Medicaid will pay all or even most of the costs.
- Find local resources through the Caregiver Resource Network (1-888-456-5664), or Eldercare Locator (1-800-677-1116). With qualified professionals who have expertise in eldercare issues, you may save a lot of time as well as money.

Last thoughts...

Your family may experience emotions and feelings that no one expected, but need to be acknowledged. Feelings of fear, anger, guilt and confusion may be presenting themselves. Take time to meet regularly, as a family or one on one or both, and give all an opportunity to express their feelings.

Giving care is a valuable gift, and can be very rewarding. Many people who care for older relatives say it brings them closer and offers opportunities to be together which would otherwise be lost.

References:

www.familycaregiversonline.com

www.sandwichgeneration.com

www.everydaywarriors.com

www.webmd.com

More resources

If you want more information about resources, the Caregiver Resource Network can help. The Network's web page (www.caregiverresource.net) can provide you with information about programs and services, fact sheets, and a questionnaire about caregiver strain. Or call Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan (616) 456.5664, or (888) 456.5664.

If you have a question you would like to see addressed in a future article, feel free to contact Hanni Epp at: Caregiver's Corner, West Michigan Caregivers Alliance, 233 E. Fulton, Ste. 222, Grand Rapids, MI 49503, or e-mail at Hanni@wmichcare.com.

Column written by Hanni Epp, MA, therapist and consultant in private practice at West Michigan Caregivers Alliance. She is also a member of Caregiver Resource Network, a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing information and support for family and professional caregivers within the community. Be sure to look for the Caregiver's Corner in the next edition of *Mature Lifestyles*.