

Solutions

FAMILY SERVICES EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS NEWSLETTER

Issue 18

THE *sandwich* GENERATION: Caught in the Middle

What is the sandwich generation?

Are you finding yourself caught between the stresses of caring for your aging parent as well as for your own children? If so, you are part of the growing number of people belonging to the so called “sandwich generation”.

The term sandwich generation is used to describe those individuals sandwiched like a slice of ham between the care demands of their aging parents and those of their own children. According to the Vanier Institute of the Family, just over three-quarters of a million Canadians live in three generation households. The middle generation has the responsibility for caring for their aging parent as well as for their own children.

People have been caring for their elders for centuries so how is the situation any different now than it has been in the past? For one thing, people are living longer and requiring care for longer periods of time. Improvements in medical science have increased life expectancy. They have also increased the length of time people can live with a debilitating illness before death. In Canada, the average life expectancy is 78 years old. Only 50 years ago it was 69.

When couples choose not to have children until later in life, they can be pushed into the sandwich generation. Couples who do not have children until they are in their 30s or 40s can end up sandwiched between the responsibilities of caring for their young children and for an older relative simultaneously. The older relative, a grandmother for example, may be too old to take on the traditional support role of helping with childraising; she may need care herself.

Even parents whose children are grown can end up in the sandwich generation if “boomerang” children move back home after divorce or job loss.

Who make up the sandwich generation?

Members of the sandwich generation are typically 45-60 year old, female, raising a family, have either a part or full time job and may or may not have a partner. It is a very stressful position, and the whole family feels the effect. More than one-third of sandwich generation members spend less time with their spouses and children than non-caregivers. They report feeling guilty and overwhelmed much of the time. They also get sick and suffer from exhaustion more frequently than non-caregivers.

How to help

Caregivers can feel alone, isolated and inadequate. No person should feel this way, especially a person who is giving so much to another. If you know someone who is caught in the sandwich generation, the best thing to do is offer him or her support and help. People caught in the sandwich generation need help. They need to have some of the pressure taken off. They need solitude, space, and appreciation from both generations. They need time with their peers, time to pursue the peek of their careers, and time to do the things they want to do.

Plan ahead

Even if you are not part of the sandwich generation right now, you need to consider the possibility that you may be part of it in the future. Oftentimes caregiving is not discussed until an event such as illness occurs, and care is needed immediately. This can lead to high stress and uninformed decisions. It is important to discuss the possibility of having to care for an older relative in the future, and research your caregiving options ahead of time.

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TIPS for caregivers

- **Take care of yourself and do what you need to do to stay healthy.** This includes having some fun and living life to the fullest. Many caregivers feel guilty about taking time for themselves, however, it is critical that the caretaker makes her own health and well being a priority in order to take care of others. Heavily stressed individuals are less effective and less efficient.
- **Be practical.** You can only do what you can do. Don't overload yourself emotionally, physically or financially.
- **Don't neglect your significant relationships.** Take time to be with the important people in your life. Make plans with your family for special afternoons in the park or movies at home. Go on a date with your partner.
- **Be in touch with yourself.** Watch out for signs of burn-out and depression. Consider discussing these issues with your physician or seek counseling if you have symptoms of depression. Be aware of increased use of anti-anxiety medication or self-medication through alcohol. Think about your own physical and mental health and get help if you see a less than healthy change.
- **Make caring for your parent a responsibility for the whole family.** It is not just the adult daughter's job. Other siblings as well as children can help. Hold a family meeting to discuss caregiving. Make a list of all responsibilities required, then discuss who might do what tasks. All family members living in the area should attend, especially the aging parent, so his or her feelings are considered.
- **Accept help from extended family, friends and neighbors.** It is very easy to say "no" when others offer to assist you. If they are not offering something helpful, make a suggestion of what they can do to help. They truly want to help and sometimes they don't know how.
- **Become an expert.** Learn as much about the medical condition you are dealing with as you can. This will alleviate the stress of not knowing what to expect, and will make you better able to care for your loved one.
- **Reflect on the positives of the relationship.** Remember why it is you are taking care of an aging parent or relative. Take time to reflect on the times that this person was a significant and giving force in your life. Renew the love and the feelings you have for the person. Sometimes the difficulties of the caregiving role can get in the way of such feelings. Look at old photo albums and, if possible, reflect and recollect with your loved one.
- **Tap into the many resources out there to help.** There are helpful sources such as; assisted living, day care for seniors, home care, short-term residential care, and church volunteer organizations that offer services to assist caregivers. Find out what resources are available in your community and take advantage of them.
- **Seek support.** Your friends or church may be excellent sources of support. Many communities have Alzheimer's support groups. There are even Internet support groups. Find out what support services are offered in your community and take advantage of them. Reach out.

Please contact your FSEAP professional to learn more about the information and support available to caregivers.

Family Services offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For more information on your EAP, call :
1-800-668-9920