

The Sandwich Generation

Since the adoption of the National Family Caregiver Support Program in late 2000, there have been numerous news articles and points of interests written about the family caregiver and their many different roles within the family and the community. Roughly, it is estimated that American families provide 80 to 90 percent of all in-home long term care services for their aging family members, disabled adult children and other loved ones.

These services may include assistance with activities of daily living (ADL's), medical services coordination, medical supervision, administration of medications and assistance with financial, legal, spiritual and emotional concerns. These services are priceless and the family caregivers that provide them often go unrecognized and over utilized which can lead to great stress for the family caregiver. In contrast, if these same services were to be provided by our national health care system, it would be estimated at approximately 250 billion dollars per year.

Sandwich Generation Caregivers

Recently, and of particular interest, there is a new buzz around a subset of caregivers known as the "Sandwich Generation". These are caregivers who find themselves squeezed in between caring for younger loved ones such as children, and their elder parents or other elder family members. While the Sandwich Generation is not a new form of family caregiving, these caregivers are receiving a long overdue peaking of interest within American society.

Currently, the typical American Sandwich Generation Caregiver is in her mid-forties, married, employed and cares for her family and an elderly parent, usually her mother. With this said, it is important to note that there are more and more men that find themselves in a caregiving role and even squeezed in between the generations. It is also important to note that there is an ever-growing segment of family and sandwich generation caregivers that live in rural communities. Unlike caregivers living in urban and industrial areas, rural caregivers may find themselves removed from readily available and professionally organized supportive services and care networks. They may also find themselves not only carrying the normal burdens

that are associated with providing care for a loved one, but also they may be faced with challenges such as geographic barriers to resources and isolation from other caregivers, family members or informal supports. This lack of service availability, care networks, and isolation from other caregivers and family members can add to caregiver stress, burnout, and depression.

Caregiver Stressors

The demanding role of being a caregiver spreads across all racial, gender, age and ethnic boundaries. Some of the common stressors that affect both urban and rural sandwich generation caregivers are:

- How do I split my time between my children/family and my elder loved one?
- How much of my time is too much time in each caregiving role?
- How do you find the time for my marriage?
- How do you find the time for myself?
- How do I keep the generational peace between my kids and my elder loved one?
- How do I find the resources that I need for my self and my loved one?
- How do I combat my feelings of isolation?
- Guilt, Guilt and more Guilt for not having enough time to accomplish all that “should” be doing.

Caregiver Tips

To counter act some of these stressors, here are some caregiver tips that may help sandwich generation caregivers along the way:

Hold A Family Meeting

At this meeting, discuss the many different caregiving tasks that need to be accomplished each day or week. Set a task list for family members to complete each day/week. Set mutual expectations of how the many tasks of caregiving will be accomplished. Caregiving is often a one-person show but it does not need to be if you have family support. The family meeting also allows for family members to participate and share in the valuable gift of caregiving and this can be very rewarding.

Communication

Encourage children and elders to communicate with one another. During the family meeting, make sure that all family members have a chance to talk about their thoughts and feelings.

Ask For Assistance

Make a point of picking up the telephone and spending time calling resources such as your local Area Agency on Aging, a hospital social worker, a physician or church. The Internet can also be a wonder resource finding tool. Never be afraid to ask for assistance when you need to, you may be surprised at who has been waiting to help you.

Take Time To Care For Yourself

Too often I meet caregivers who are run down and even sick because they have not taken time to care for themselves. Sure, no one can take care of your loved ones as well as you do but you must care for yourself if you want to continue to care for your loved one. This is not an act of selfishness, it is actually an act of great giving.

Take time every day to “check-in” with yourself, even if it is only 10 minutes. This should be your protected time. Enjoy this time by reading, listening to music, exercising or whatever you like to do.

- Remember to laugh at the funny things in life.
- Take time to be “in” your marriage.
- Listen to your body. If your body is telling you to slow down, or that something is not right, seek medical advice. Too often we do not listen to our bodies no matter how loudly they may be talking to us.

Every caregiver and caregiving situation is unique but there are always common factors which bridge these situations and caregivers together. It is easy to become lost in the caregiving that you are providing but remember that support can come from many different sources and in many different ways. For those of you who are squeezed in the sandwich generation please know that you are not alone and that assistance is often only a telephone call or internet site away. Your local Family Caregiver Support Program is here to help you.

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