

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Sandwiched Priorities: Caring for Both Children and Elders

If you're feeling the generational squeeze, you're not alone. While the dual responsibilities of taking care of both children and elderly parents can be extremely rewarding, it can also leave "sandwichers" stressed out, anxious and exhausted. Providing physical and emotional support to both generations is challenging; finding time for yourself even more so. As stress and problems mount, your health may ultimately be affected.

Family relationships can also become strained. Partners, siblings and extended family members may be unable or unwilling to help out. Maintaining ties with elderly parents who live far away can also cause pangs of guilt and be equally time consuming.

Children may react to the tension by misbehaving or withdrawing from family affairs. The collective stress created can be overwhelming and can appear insurmountable. But even if family obligations can't change how you deal with and respond to daily hurdles can.

Coming to Terms with a Parent's Situation

It's not easy to watch parents grow old and, perhaps, frail. You may mourn your parents' lost youth. You may also be swept up by emotions including anger, guilt and grief before finally reaching acceptance. Recognition and awareness of your emotions can help you identify the connection between your feelings and behavior, and allow you to re-evaluate your caregiving responsibilities.

Honest self-reflection can move you toward restoring balance. The tips below can further help you reclaim your sandwiched life and improve the quality of time that you spend with your parents, children and by yourself:

Create a plan of action. Sit down with the entire family and discuss the future frankly. Hammer out a long-term plan that clearly lays out each family member's responsibilities. If educational and elder care costs are causing you financial stress, try drawing up a detailed budget to ease your anxiety.

Accept that you'll have good days and bad. Frustration, stress and guilt are well-known to the sandwich generation. So too are optimism, joy and love. Waves of both are natural. If you're overwhelmed by negative feelings, though, don't bottle them up. Talk to a close friend, spouse or join an elder care support group.

Include your elderly relatives. When decision-making, respect your elderly relatives’ need for independence, and be sure to include them in all decisions that affect them. Let your elders do what they are able to for as long as they can. It's important to help them maintain their dignity, especially when their health and abilities begin to deteriorate. Reinforce your love and support for them every day.

Use the resources available to you. Look into child and elder care options available in your area including day programs for the elderly. A Dependent Care Consultant can perform a personalized search to locate child, parenting and elder care programs and services in your community.

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Seek the additional support of a counselor if you're feeling stressed and unable to cope. A counselor can provide valuable insight into your situation and work with you to create solutions that help you care for your family without losing yourself.

Asking for Help

Often the people around you don't realize that you're struggling. Sometimes a straightforward plea for help is all that's needed. If you have asked for help, but still feel under-supported, the suggestions below can help you express your needs more effectively:

- **Prepare a list of chores and activities that you do on a daily and weekly basis.** At the next family meeting, pass the list out. Chances are your family will be astonished by all of the things you take care of. It's easy to overlook work and take others' efforts for granted if they're not pointed out.

- **Discuss your duties with family members and ask each person to take on a few tasks they're interested in.** Don't aim for an even split of responsibilities at first since your family will probably feel overwhelmed in the beginning.

- **Create a schedule that assigns tasks to older children, your partner and your parents.** Get everyone to participate as much as they can to reduce your load.

- **Don't assume your family will naturally know how to do particular tasks.** Explain the tasks to them, what is involved and the end result you are seeking.

- **Don't expect perfection.** Remember that each person has a different way of doing things and different standards. Support and praise efforts made by family members to help you.

It's easy to lose sight of your situation and become resentful or a martyr. Remember that there are others who can cover some of the work and share the load. Just because those around you don't react to a situation your way doesn't mean they don't care. Family members and friends may be caught up in their own emotional struggle or feel overwhelmed by other responsibilities. But whether it's from your family, a support group or a counselor, solid support can help ease the pressure from all sides and help you enjoy life as a “sandwicher”.