

Of Interest

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Eldercare – Caring For Those Who Cared for Us

by Liz Ashe

In February, Brian Williams of NBC news presented a two part series titled, *Reversing Roles, Caring for Our Parents*. Many working Americans - called the “Sandwich Generation” - are feeling squeezed between the growing dependence of their elders and the needs of their own children and spouse or significant other. I read about the generation that delivers grandma to the doctor’s office, then collects junior at the high school game. I read about rocking chairs squeaking in one room, while rap music blares in another. But I didn’t pay much attention. Until my elderly parent became seriously ill and had to spend the rest of her life at a health care facility.

Overnight, I was faced with the constant juggling of work, family, and eldercare! I talked to people in social services and I had terms thrown at me that made my head spin; skilled nursing facility, long-term care, intermediate care facilities, adaptive living, assisted living, group homes, boarding homes, adult foster homes, congregate housing, respite care, home health care, and visiting nurses. I remember feeling so lost and confused, I wanted to scream.

It was hard enough dealing with my normal responsibilities and her illness, but facing so many confusing options and decisions truly overwhelmed me.

We are now facing an aging society. According to agingstats.gov there were just over 90 million people over the age of 60 in the US as of 2004. Over three million were 85 or over. In 2005, the US had about 296 million people and that means that almost one third of the population was minimally qualified as elderly! Within this elderly population, roughly 58% (about 52 million people) were estimated to have some (at least minimal) need for eldercare.

The elderly represent the fastest-growing segment in any age group. The good news is we have our loved ones longer. The down side is that half of the elderly require daily assistance or 24-hour care.

According to the Administration on Aging, more than 22 million (roughly one in five) US households, provide informal or formal care to one or more elderly persons.

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Some Agencies and Organizations for Caregivers (not inclusive)

- AARP 1.800.424.3410 www.aarp.org
- American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging. 1.202.783.2242 www.aahsa.org
- Assisted Living Federation of America 1.703.894.1805 www.alfa.org
- Eldercare National Locator 1.800.677.1116 www.eldercare.gov
- Children of Aging Parents 800.227.7294 www.caps4caregivers.org
- Family Caregiver Alliance 800.445.8106 or 1.415.434.3388 www.caregiver.org
- National Alliance for Caregiving 1.301.718.8444 www.caregiving.org
- National Association of Area Agencies on Aging 202.872.0888 www.n4a.org
- National Family Caregivers Association 1.800.896.3650 www.thefamilycaregiver.org
- National Hospice Foundation 1.703.516.4928 www.nationalhospicefoundation.org

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Caring for someone you love is rewarding, but also presents many challenges and stressors. Having the responsibility of elders can feel like an emotional minefield; a disturbing mixture of anxiety and helplessness. And it can take a toll on caregivers.

Caregivers must find ways to balance the demands of family, community, work and the elder with their own needs, i.e. hobbies, fun, social activities, classes etc. Being pulled in many different directions is a common complaint. Too often, the caregivers personal needs are put on a back burner.

Being a caregiver often conflicts with doing your job. As an employed caregiver, you may lose time from work, need to come in late, take unscheduled time off, and spend a large segment of your time on the phone. You may decide to work part-time resulting in a loss of benefits, pension credits and opportunities for advancement.

Since 1993, federal law offers some support for working caregivers through the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). This 12 weeks a year of unpaid leave helps individuals who can afford it care for a family member. But it is also very important to learn your company's policy about caregiving and any flex-time policies. Talk to your supervisor and or HR department about your commitment to work and that you want to work with them to meet their needs as well as your needs. You might discuss options like working a flexible shift, or making up the time by working days or shifts most people want off. Consider job-sharing or working part-time if it could work for you.

Whenever possible, avoid mixing work with caregiving. If you have to make phone calls or search the Internet for information, do it on your lunch break. Manage your time well at work and home. It is crucial to set a ranked priority list and decide what is important and less important to do. You may need to say "no" even if it disappoints someone.

Caregiving requires the use of many services and can be very confusing. It will help if you keep good records. Keep track of all contacts and information. Make notes as you talk to providers. Collect brochures and other information provided by organizations and agencies. Keep copies of letters you write and receive.

Remember, you are not alone. Don't let your cup get empty before asking for assistance. No one functions at their best when experiencing the cumulative stressors involved in caregiving. There is help available and fortunately, support systems and eldercare specialists offer help to caregivers to ease their load. Also, your company's EAP counselor will be happy to help you sort things out and identify resources that can help. Please don't hesitate to call.

Self- Care Helps Prevent Burnout

- Learn ways to balance caregiving time with your personal, family and work life.
- Don't let your loved one take center stage all the time. Talk with your loved one about your needs and his/her needs. Then discuss ways to balance each.
- Accept any feeling (guilt, anger, frustration, and helplessness) as normal but try to focus on the personal satisfaction that comes from helping a loved one.
- Be good to yourself by exercising, getting enough rest, and eating healthy foods.
- Watch out for signs of depression and don't delay getting help if needed.
- If you feel trapped or "burned out" take a break from the caregiving. Hire help when possible or ask others for help.
- Set priorities at work and home so that you don't get bogged down.
- Schedule quality time with the other people in your life who need you. Don't put your family or friends on a back burner all the time. Communicate well and often to avoid a build-up of resentment.
- Talk to your employer about your caregiving responsibilities and talk of ways to balance these with your job or make up the time away from work.
- Schedule quality time for yourself. Do something fun and enjoyable.
- Get help with managing the financial impact of caregiving.
- Involve others in the house in planning and responsibilities. Don't try to do it all. Accept help when it is offered. Ask for help.
- Talk it out. Get expert advice and support. Meet with other caregivers and support groups. Call EAP.

**If you are still having problems,
your EAP is here for you.**

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