

Sandwiched in the Middle: Juggling Care for Elderly Parents and Your Family

BY CAROLYN MAILLE-PETERSEN

Seeking the right balance between work, raising children and caring for aging parents can seem like looking for a needle in a haystack. One woman shares how she maintains her sanity in the midst of the process.

A year and a half ago, Michelle Booth quit her job to start a home-based business in an effort to better juggle her caregiving responsibilities to her 14-year-old daughter and 87- and 88-year old parents. Booth is not alone. According to statistics compiled by the Caregiver Resource Network (CRN) in western Michigan, one in four American households is caring for an elderly relative, and this number will continue to grow as the population ages.

Additionally, like Booth, the vast majority of caregivers are female. To be fair, men now make up 39 percent of family caregivers, but women still tend to provide more hours and a wider range of care than men, according to CRN statistics.

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Women as Caregivers

Women tend to take on the task of caregiving because "it's notoriously a gender role expectation," says Leslie Hammer, Ph.D. Hammer and Margaret Neal, Ph.D., co-authored *Working Couples Caring for Children and Aging Parents: Effects on Work and Well-Being*, a book on the "sandwiched generation." What they found is that women more so than men reduce their work hours, bypass promotions, and generally make accommodations in the workplace to take care of family obligations.

These obligations range from making phone calls just to chat, to balancing checkbooks, running errands

and taking parents to and from appointments, among other things. And these obligations were performed by caregivers who generally lived separately from their elderly parents, either locally or long-distance.

In Booth's case, her parents live with her and her daughter, which is atypical, according to Hammer. Booth's parents first came to live with her 10 years ago after she and her husband divorced. Five years

Advice for Caregivers from Caregivers

- Take care of yourself.
- Set aside time to spend with your spouse.
- Ask others for help.
- Learn to say no.
- Join a support group.
- Hire a housekeeper.
- Choose a job with a flexible schedule.
- Work at home.
- Take advantage of family-friendly workplace policies.
- Reduce your work hours if possible.
- Gear down your lifestyle.
- Take one day at a time.
- Don't try to be everything to everyone.
- Set priorities and budget time accordingly.
- Keep communications flowing.
- Use a large calendar to schedule family activities.
- Plan for your own future.
- Have patience.
- Don't lose your sense of humor.

From *Working Couples Caring for Children and Aging Parents: Effects on Work and Well-Being*, by Margaret Neal, Ph.D., and Leslie Hammer, Ph.D. Published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

earlier, they moved from Des Moines, Iowa, to the San Francisco Bay area to help Booth care for her daughter, Alystar, now 14. For financial reasons, they ended up living together after Booth's divorce. At first, it was very helpful to her, says Booth, but over time, things changed. "They were elderly to begin with," says Booth, "but both of them had strokes two or three years ago. It changed their ability to drive and get to activities. Right away they couldn't do anything unless I was there with them."

Though they are somewhat self-sufficient when it comes to personal hygiene activities, even that isn't always a given. Any time they have to spend time in the hospital, they temporarily lose the ability to take care of their basic needs, such as showering and dressing, and Booth needs to help them. And even though it's a struggle, she encourages them to be as self-sufficient as possible in these areas because she feels it's better for everyone if they can maintain their independence as much as possible. Even regular household tasks such as laundry become a larger task

if one has a parent who is incontinent and who doesn't want to wear special underwear to alleviate the problem.

To further complicate matters, Booth's mother has Alzheimer's disease. Her parents cannot be left alone for more than a couple hours at a time, so she often has to cut activities short in order to get home to them. This also makes it extremely difficult to take a vacation.

Through it all, her daughter has been very understanding, says Booth. "Alystar has lived with it for 10 years," says Booth. "She's really terrific. I hope it's a good role model I'm providing. She kind of goes with the flow."

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Nonetheless, Booth makes a concerted effort not to get her daughter too involved in the caregiving process because she has her own life to attend to. But if she needs her help, Booth says [Alystar] will do it without blinking."

Juggling Act

"It's a challenge to balance all of this stuff and maintain my sanity," says Booth. "It's not often that I have time for myself or for just mother-daughter things."

Booth's situation is typical in that she is trying to juggle the needs of her daughter with the needs of her parents. This mirrors the general national trend. Women in particular reported difficulties juggling their roles as daughters, wives, mothers and employees, according to the CRN. Besides the toll on time and finances, there's an emotional

toll, as well. "It's painful on both sides," says Booth. "It's very painful watching your parents falling apart and there's nothing you can do."

Women and families who fare best in these situations are the ones who have supportive spouses and children, according to Hammer's study. In particular, the quality of a caregiver's relationship with her/his spouse was the most important factor in how well the caregiver dealt with the stress of the situation. The spousal relationship was found to be even more important than quality of the caregiver's relationship with children or parents. "If there's not a good bond there (between husband and wife), you just don't have a foundation to deal with the rest of the stress," says Hammer. For this reason, Hammer says it is important to focus on the relationships in your life, no matter how difficult it is to find the time. "Foster that time with your spouse. Don't let that slide. You think you're stressed now, that'll make it even worse," she says.

TURNING TO OUTSIDE HELP

Booth doesn't have the support of a spouse. Instead, she manages her situation by turning to outside help. Her parents attend adult day care five days a week, thanks in part to financial assistance from the Veterans' Administration. She also contacted the Family Caregiving Association (FCA), a national organization based in the greater San Francisco area, and the FCA helped her find respite care, an attorney to help her with legal aspects of her parents' care, and someone who could retrofit her home with assistive devices such as handrails. In addition, Booth has attended FCA-sponsored workshops on topics such as basic caregiving skills and communicating

with someone whose memory is fading. Booth has high praise for the FCA, calling the organization a "phenomenal resource."

For more information on caregiving and where to find help in your area, check out the listing of resources at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration on Aging Web site: http://www.aoa.gov/prof/aoaprogram/caregiver/careprof/resources/caregiver_resources.asp.

It is thanks to organizations such as the FCA that Booth is able to make the best of her situation. Despite it all, if given the opportunity to do it all over, Booth wouldn't do anything differently. "I feel very blessed to have my parents," she says. "It's not even in my vocabulary to put them in an institution." ■

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