



HEALTHQUEST

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOCUSING ON
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CONCERNS.

THE SANDWICH GENERATION

Giving to work and family can be difficult at times for everyone but for people in the 'sandwich generation' - caring for children and elderly parents - life can be especially demanding. Children need us to look after their physical needs, take an interest in their activities and give emotional support and guidance. As parents age (and particularly if they become ill), they may need help with personal care, financial matters and routine errands and tasks.

The major challenge is to balance our responsibilities with healthful time for ourselves - but also to find meaning and enjoyment in the responsibilities we do take on.

STRETCHED TO THE LIMIT

Diane Labonté, a Warren Shepell counsellor in Montreal, sees many 'sandwich generation' clients who feel 'stretched to the limit'. In addition to their jobs they are putting in many hours of cooking, cleaning, child care and attending to parents who are in hospital or at home. According to a recent University of Toronto study, "sandwich generation" women phoned their elderly parents three to seven times a week.¹

Maintaining ties with aging parents who live far away can be particularly difficult. One woman used up all of her vacation time and savings travelling back and forth to visit her mother in another province.

As stress and problems mount, health may be affected. Labonté has noticed that overburdened caregivers tend to experience frequent colds, migraines and back problems.

Family relationships can also become strained. Partners, siblings and extended family members may be unable or unwilling to help out. Children may react to the tension by misbehaving or withdrawing from family affairs. Says one teenager, 'I love my grandfather, but his sickness scares me. Mom spends all her spare time taking care of him and freaking out. I just want to get away from them whenever I can.'

Our changing society puts many stressors on the family which require us to re-evaluate our situations and seek creative solutions. Your Warren Shepell counsellor can help you begin this process. Through your counsellor, you can access some of the outside help

you may need, such as quality health and homemaker services for your parent (even if he or she lives in another city) as well as child care that you can trust. Above all, your counsellor can help you connect with the ability to care for your family without losing yourself.

COMING TO TERMS WITH A PARENT'S SITUATION

It's not easy to watch parents grow old and perhaps, frail. 'As we confront the fact that our parents are having more difficulties, we begin to go through a mourning process,' says Labonté.

This involves a variety of emotions - such as anger, guilt, grief - and eventually, a kind of acceptance. 'It's normal to feel swept up by painful feelings,' adds Labonté but it's important to become aware of what we're feeling and recognize that sometimes, the amount and type of care we give parents might be more related to our emotions than to our parents' legitimate needs. Here is a case in point:

A worn-out daughter who insisted upon visiting her father in hospital every day finally realized she was over extending herself because she felt both guilt and anger about his condition. 'I felt guilty that I couldn't make him better and angry that no one else could either. The worse I felt, the more I needed to be at the hospital, fussing over him and arguing with the medical staff, but that wasn't helping him and it was taking valuable time away from other people and activities that were also important to me.'

Connecting our feelings to our behaviours can eventually help us re-evaluate our caregiving responsibilities. This, in turn, will help restore a sense of balance in scheduling activities and may improve the quality of time spent with parents.

One woman (whose mother had Alzheimer's Disease), found their visits much more enjoyable once she stopped feeling hurt and frustrated when her mother didn't recognize her. 'I realized this had nothing to do with me, it was part of her condition. I got used to introducing myself politely at every visit and seeing her react with surprise and pleasure each time. What was important to both of us, was enjoying the moment together.'

MAKING THE MOST OF TIME SPENT WITH CHILDREN

As we move toward accepting our parent's situation, it may become easier to relate to children in effective and fulfilling ways.

- ▲ Use the time you already spend with children to really connect with them. Engage them in conversation while you are driving them to and from various activities, around the family dinner table or before they go to bed. Children are naturally curious; let them choose the topic, then encourage their questions and opinions. Or choose a topic of your own; perhaps something interesting that you saw or experienced that day.
- ▲ If a grandparent is ill, talk to children honestly about the situation, focussing on the grandparent's abilities as well as disabilities. "Children are more tolerant of their own and others imperfections when they see us modelling tolerance and balance ourselves," Labonté observes.

ENCOURAGING PARTNERS, SIBLINGS AND OLDER CHILDREN TO HELP OUT

A common complaint among members of the sandwich generation is "I'm the only one doing for my parents. No one else in the family cares!" The fact is: just because people don't react to a situation your way doesn't mean they don't care. Most likely, they are caught up in their own painful emotions or feel caught up by responsibilities themselves. Here are some suggestions for getting others involved:

- ▲ First, get your family to agree in principle to helping out a little more with tasks and responsibilities. If you have tried repeatedly to address specific imbalances, take a break from this for a few days before bringing up the subject. This will give everyone some breathing space.
- ▲ Once family members have agreed in principle, suggest a time a few days later when you can discuss this a little more. In the meantime, prepare a list of all the things that you are doing on a daily and weekly basis.
- ▲ At the next family meeting, show them the list and the chances are they'll be astonished by all of the things you are doing. It's easy to take things for granted and be quite unaware of all the efforts put into these responsibilities.
- ▲ Engage individual family members in discussing which "few" of these tasks they would be interested in taking on. Don't go for an "even split" of responsibilities. Since your family doesn't have a sense of what's involved with various tasks, they are likely to feel overwhelmed.
- ▲ 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.
- ▲ Finally remember to ease up on your expectations of perfection. Support and praise your family's efforts.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Part of re-evaluating caregiving responsibilities is recognizing that taking care of our own health and well-being must be a priority. On days that you can't seem to carve out special time for yourself, try incorporating some enjoyable rituals into your routine:

- ▲ Listen to your favourite music or radio talk show while you are driving or working around your home.
- ▲ If you accompany parents and children to medical appointments take advantage of the time in the waiting room to catch up on your reading or on some "portable hobby" such as word puzzles.

- ▲ Take a half hour before going to bed to prepare yourself for a restful sleep. Enjoy a leisurely walk; take a soothing shower or bath - or watch something humorous on TV. If nagging worries are keeping you awake, try jotting them down rather than playing them over and over in your mind. Then resolve to look over the list when your mind is less foggy with fatigue.
- ▲ Regardless of the number of people in our care or the responsibilities we've taken on, it helps to remind ourselves that we can only handle one task at a time. Giving ourselves to each task without the burden of fatigue, guilt or resentment will help us naturally discover the special meaning it has in our lives.

Here are some ideas you might consider:

- ▲ automatic bill paying and "direct deposit" of such things as pension cheques
- ▲ a supplemental health insurance policy to cover the gaps in provincial health insurance
- ▲ a durable power of attorney that gives you the right to manage the money and negotiate with your parent's landlord
- ▲ a check of your parent's home to pre-vent accidents and help your parent get around more easily. Are lights bright enough?
- ▲ Are throw rugs a hazard? Does your parent need a telephone with large numbers or a stool in the tub?
- ▲ a Medic Alert bracelet to alert health care professional to allergies and special medical needs
- ▲ a list of your parent's current support system: doctor, lawyer, banker, church or temple, friends neighbours Certain friends might be willing to help out a bit by taking your parent shopping or by mowing the lawn

Reference: ¹ The Woman In the Middle: The Sandwich Generation Revisited. Benjamin Schlesinger, Dennis Raphael, University of Toronto. International Journal of Sociology of the Family 1993, Vol. 23 (Spring): 77-87

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors to arrange a telephone or in-person counselling session.

All contact between you and your counsellor is completely confidential.

English Service: 1-800-387-4765
French Service: 1-800-361-5676
General Information: 1-888-814-1328

 **WARREN SHEPELL**
The EAP Professionals