

The Sandwich Generation can get spread too thin

By SUZANNE KENNEDY

Are you a part of the “Sandwich Generation?” If you are in your 30s or 40s and have children at home as well as parents who currently need or may soon need care, you are. If you’re really lucky, you are a grandparent yourself, taking care of elderly parents. That makes you a “club sandwich,” in case you’re wondering.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the average life expectancy was less than 50. Today, the average is in the upper 70s for men and in the low 80s for women, and it has continued to rise.

By the time today’s young ones reach their 30s, U.S. life expectancy is predicted to increase by about 10 years. Advances in care, disease control and medicine will vastly increase the number of elderly people. In fact, most babies born today may well live to be 100.

The economic impact will be staggering. Finances, education, retirement, transportation, all will have to change. We have to start planning for this now in order not to be blindsided later on.

Being a part of the sandwich generation can be incredibly stressful. You may be juggling a job, two parents with dementia, and middle

school drama all at the same time. Often, private care for the older generation is just too expensive (\$3,000 to \$5,000 per month or more). Not many of us have that much extra cash lying around.

At a time when your life should finally be falling into place, caring for parents and children at the same time can have you feeling overwhelmed, out of control, and even cheated. Don’t forget the added guilt for feeling all those things.

This can be a real burden on families, and especially marriages. To make matters worse, children often act out during these stressful times, and you may be the only adult child near enough to physically be there. If you are feeling like you are constantly in crisis mode, it’s time to step back, take a deep breath, and regain control.

Social worker and care manager Paula Banks recommends creating a plan:

Breathe. Our first reaction to crises is often fight or flight. Slowing down, breathing, and taking

a few moments before you react can help. Is someone in imminent danger of death or injury? If not, give yourself some time to think through your options before you rush into anything.

Let go of the guilt. You probably feel like you can’t please anyone, but are trying to take care of all of



them ... at the same time. Guess what? You’re right. You can only do your best. Assess your responsibilities and see where you could use some help.

Speaking of help, you know when those nice people ask if there’s anything they can do? **Say yes.** And don’t be afraid to ask for help when you need it, either. Try reaching out. The Area Agencies on Aging in nearly all communities can help with resources as well. Go to www.n4a.org to find one in your area (in Umatilla and Morrow counties, CAPECO is the primary resource). Have another parent drive your son to practice or ask your pastor to visit with your mom.

Involve your children. Have your 18-year-old take Papa to his doctor’s appointment. Tell your fifth



Strategies

grader to learn a new card game with Grandma. Age-appropriate help will give your children the opportunity to get to know their grandparents on a new level, develop respect for the older generation, and grow a sense of pride. Still, it’s not always as easy as that. Karen Moore of Pendleton has five children and takes care of her mother with Alzheimer’s. She contends that balancing quality time with both generations provides some difficulties. She doesn’t want spending time with Grandma to become a chore, especially when the children don’t remember when Grandma was really herself.

Finally, **don’t forget about yourself.** Connect with your friends, continue your activities, and take some time to be alone. This will sustain you during the crazy times when everything falls apart on the same day.

Creating a plan will help you bring the chaos under control. You owe it to yourself (and your family) to stay physically and mentally healthy in this stressful and emotional time.

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