

Navigating Work and Personal Life as Your Family Ages

Overview

Ways to navigate the many responsibilities you face as your relatives age.

- Looking at your priorities
- Assessing your family's needs
- Planning ahead and getting organized
- Managing the stress, taking care of yourself
- Seeking support
- Staying connected to others

According to the National Alliance for Caregiving, about two out of three people actively caring for a loved one are employed, and more than half of those are employed full-time. The responsibilities of caring for older or dependent relatives affect our relationships, work, and personal lives. Studies show that many employees who are caring for an aging relative must take time off from work, unpaid leave, or use sick days or vacation time to handle caregiving responsibilities. Balancing elder or dependent care responsibilities along with work and personal responsibilities can be a challenging job. The following information will help you navigate these responsibilities and find resources and support.

Looking at your priorities

The responsibility of caring for aging relatives along with caring for children, teenagers, or grandchildren, managing personal responsibilities, and succeeding at work can be stressful and feel overwhelming at times. Studies show that caregivers must often give up time spent on hobbies, social life, and family activities in order to care for an older relative. Looking at your priorities, examining how you spend your time, and focusing on what's important will help you better meet the many demands you face.

- *Decide what's important to you and what your priorities are.*
- *Talk with your partner or spouse or a trusted friend about the work-family choices you are making and whether they are working.* Our work lives change, our relatives age, and our family's needs change over time. As your parents age and need care, for example, you might decide to adjust your work schedule or make other choices that fit better with your family's needs.
- *Cut back where you can.* If you feel overloaded by family and work responsibilities, let go of commitments that aren't vital at this time. You might resign from a volunteer position, for example, to free up some time. You may need to say "no" to requests from others in order to meet family responsibilities.
- *Consider making adjustments to your work schedule if possible.* Some people choose to work part time, take a pay cut, or postpone opportunities for career advancement in order to care for an aging relative. A Brandeis University study found that two-thirds of employees caring for an elderly or dependent relative forgo promotions, raises, and training opportunities.

- *Make time for yourself.* Time for you is usually the first thing to go when demands pile up. But if you neglect your own needs, you'll gradually wear yourself down to the point where you won't have the patience and strength you need to be there for your older relative. Make time for yourself a priority. Taking a walk or visiting with a friend doesn't mean that you are neglecting your family responsibilities. Instead, it lets you return to your tasks with new strength. It also gives you the fresh perspective you need to find solutions to the challenges of caregiving.

Assessing your family's needs

Whether you drive your mother to doctor's appointments several times a month or your partner or spouse to treatments for a chronic condition, you know how time-consuming these responsibilities can be. Many employees who are caring for an older or dependent relative delay seeking assistance from others and try to do it all themselves. It's only when the situation becomes critical or unmanageable that people tend to seek help -- when a parent falls and breaks a hip or a spouse is diagnosed and goes into the hospital. Assessing your relative's health needs and ability to live independently before a crisis occurs, and being aware of and realistic about your relative's situation, will help you prepare for the future.

Planning ahead and getting organized

Planning ahead and organizing your time, tasks, and paperwork will help you give the best care possible to your older relative.

- *Locate and organize your older relative's legal, financial, insurance, and medical documents.* Keep good records of all your conversations, meetings, and phone calls with service providers and health care providers. Be sure that you write down the name and the title of anybody that you speak with, the date of the conversation and what action is expected to be taken and by whom, what you're supposed to do, and what they're supposed to do and when. Be sure that you save these notes so you can refer to them later.
- *Know how to get in touch with your older relative's health care providers, pharmacist, and insurance provider.* Keep the numbers in your datebook, address book, and computer files.
- *If you are a long-distance caregiver, visit and spend time with your older relative.* You might spend a weekend every month or so with your relative, depending on whether this is realistic and how far away from one another you live.
- *Have a backup plan for emergencies and for when you know you will be away.* Will you be able to rely on friends, relatives, or company resources if the arrangement you have now falls through? Are you going away on a business trip? Is your daughter about to graduate? If you know that a demanding time is approaching, be

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prepared and line up extra help now. There are resources available through work to help you find backup elder care.

- *Have family meetings to talk about sharing caregiving responsibilities.*
- *Find out what resources are available through work to help with balancing caregiving demands.* Talk with your manager about ways to meet the many demands of your job and family responsibilities. There may be options and resources available through work such as workplace caregiver support groups, paid leave for caregiver activities, flextime, telecommuting or working from home, working a part-time or reduced schedule, or working compressed hours. Many employers offer paid or unpaid leave that allows employees to care for seriously ill family members.
- *Manage your time well at home and at work.* Make to-do lists. Set priorities. Identify things you can drop from your list. Take a few minutes before work to prepare for the coming day and a few minutes at the end of your workday to think about what you need to do the next day. Be efficient in scheduling appointments and running errands to make the best use of your time.

Managing the stress, taking care of yourself

Studies show that many caregivers experience stress and sacrifice their own physical and mental health to care for their loved one. This is true for both men and women. That's why it's important to take care of yourself and to manage feelings of stress. The U.S. Surgeon General recently issued a new "prescription for caregivers":

- *Talk with your doctor if you feel depressed or anxious.* Signs that you may need help include crying more, sleeping more or less than usual, changes in appetite, and lack of interest in your regular activities.
- *Find out about sources of support and help in your community.* Reach out to family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and people in your faith community for help with caregiver tasks.
- *Realize that your health matters.* It benefits everyone if you stay healthy and less stressed. Visit your doctor every year and be sure to get a flu shot.
- *Be aware of the toll stress takes on your health.* Try to find time for exercise, eating well, and sleeping enough.
- *Learn about the condition your loved one is facing* and how it may affect his or her physical and emotional state.

Seeking support

Most importantly, don't try to go it alone.

- *Build a network of support.* Put together formal and informal networks of both paid and unpaid resources and providers. You may need people to help with elder care, backup care, cooking, transportation, being home with your older relative, or helping with other obligations while you are away. Call on friends, relatives, neighbors, as well as paid providers to be part of your network of support.
- *Maintain these networks of support.* Remember to show your appreciation often for people's support and help. Think of ways that you can return this help and be a contributing part of other people's network of support.
- *Ask for specific help.* Don't just say, "It would be great if you could help out." Ask for specific help. "Could you come every other Saturday morning for two hours to be with mom so that I can go do errands?" Or ask your nephew to come by to mow the lawn or your niece to drive grandma to the hair salon.
- *Share caregiving responsibilities with your partner or spouse, siblings, and other relatives.* Remember that older children in the family can help, too. They can't assume full-time responsibilities, but they might be able to help with errands and chores.
- *Take advantage of the resources available to you through work to help with elder care concerns.* Your company's employee assistance program (EAP) or work-life program provides a wealth of resources, including help with finding elder housing, assisted living, respite care, local services in your community, and practical daily services such as aides, transportation, and shopping and meal delivery for your older relative.

Staying connected to others

Connecting with others and having people to talk to about your concerns makes life's challenges easier to handle. It can also help to provide the practical information you need to take good care of the person you love.

- *Share your concerns with family members and close friends.* Remember to include your children. You may tailor your discussion based on their ages, but they will feel much more in control if they are "in the know." It's also a way to teach your children about aging and older people.
- *Make time for your relationship as a couple.*
- *Share your concerns with trusted co-workers.* One study showed that employees who felt they could share their elder care concerns and problems with trusted co-workers reported higher levels of well-being and performance. Co-workers may be able to share strategies they used to successfully handle problems similar to the ones you may be facing and help you find resources through work or in the community.

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Finally, remember to show your gratitude for people's help and assistance. And give back when others are in need. Offer to help a co-worker who may be going through a hard time. Cook a meal for a neighbor who has helped you. Show your love and appreciation to family and friends for all that they do for you at this time.

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