

Question: I quit my job because I have to take care of both my mother and father-in-law. Each live in a different area, about 20 minutes from each other and 20 minutes from us. I'm in the car every day running errands and making sure they eat properly and take their medicines. I'm exhausted, frustrated and angry. How can I regain my own life?

Answer: You need help! Help in doing the chores themselves and in setting parameters of what you comfortably can do. Balancing life in your situation certainly isn't easy. But you need to put yourself on top of your priority list. A few suggestions.

If your mother and father-in-law like each other and get along, sharing one house can reduce your driving time and the need for separate grocery shopping, etc. It would also give the elders companionship. A three-bedroom, two bath house, would allow each privacy.

Also, hiring someone else to do basic chores will relieve you of the responsibility and constant running. They can pool their financial resources to hire one person to help both of them. Then you can return to work, especially if you really enjoy it.

For yourself, remember that regular relaxation is critical to your own health.

Relaxation is not escapist. It's important you put yourself on the top of any to-do priority list.

- Take each day and do at least one thing that you thoroughly enjoy - even if it's just sitting in a corner reading, doing a crossword puzzle or listening to music.
- Take deep abdominal based breathes. Five minutes a day will help reduce stress.
- Watch what you eat. If caffeine or sugar are "uppers" and keep you awake at night, avoid them.  
Over scheduling chores is not worth the stress. Get help!
- Skip the mental replay of an incident or your situation. Thinking about things are not going to change them. Shut the mental door!
- Low impact exercise can be even better than aggressive activities. They help increase blood circulation and also provide an atmosphere where your brain can "go blank." A great refresher.
- Quiet down your environment. Turn off the radio and TV. Reduce the times you are surrounded by people, movement, noise. A mall on a weekday can energize; on the weekend, stay away.
- Meditation helps you become more in tune with yourself.
- Call or write a friend at least once a week. Go out for coffee, lunch, even breakfast and think of "good" things to talk about.

Question: My father recently passed away and my mother, 68, has latched on to me for everything. In between getting my three children to school and my part-time work, I run errands for her, handle her finances and doctors trips and now have no time for myself. I'm stressed and snappy, and my husband is complaining that he feels neglected. I can't seem to find a balance.

Answer: Your mother is very young, so unless she has physical or health handicaps she should be taking care of herself. My philosophy has always been "The less one does for a parent, given true capabilities and help needs, the better it is for everyone."

Rather than do everything for your mother, encourage her to do for herself. Teach her to do the things she might not have done before - such as balancing the checkbook.

It's hard for a person to adjust after losing a spouse. But too often adult children destroy their own lives by trying to make a parent happy and by setting up unrealistic "help" schedules. You need to set parameters and limits as to what you'll do.

You need to differentiate between realistic and unrealistic demands. And certainly don't feel guilty if you say "no."

Some more TIPS from other readers:

- Don't let a parent run your life.
- Don't be afraid of your parent. You are both adults.
- Try to understand what it means to lose a loved one.
- Help your parent appreciate what she can do for herself.
- Don't feel guilty about not doing everything.
- Give love freely.
- Be good to yourself. Don't let yourself become burned out.

Question: My mother, 76, moved in with us. She still drives and is making new friends at the local senior center. We're delighted about this. But she has a habit of quizzing me as to what I'm going to do all day. I resent her checking up on me all the time. Need advice.

Answer: Regardless of how old mother and child are there is always a tendency to be a mother, to be concerned about that child (even if the child is 50 years old).

Don't you keep track of where your children are and what they do? You're interested in their activities and concerned about their well-being.

Such exchanges can be described as loving -- as long as your mother doesn't insist on going with you all the time. They can be used to identify time in your busy schedules so you both can enjoy a lunch out together. Do discuss your feelings with her. Open communications is very important when several generations live in the same house.

Question: I'm running myself ragged trying to keep my very ill mother, 80, my spouse and two teenagers "happy." No one seems to care about me. I'm ready to walk out on it all. Help!

Answer: Yes, you do need help, and the only one who can really help is yourself. Stop doing everything for everyone else. Learn to say "no" and to set parameters as to what you will do. Do only what's necessary, especially if other members of the family can do for self and/or help you with your mother.

No one should be expected to do everything for others and nothing for yourself. You do no one any good and important relationships will wither. Do less of the not so enjoyable chores and more of the things that give you pleasure. Sit down and discuss your feelings and need for help with everyone.

Question: My father, 77, can no longer drive, go shopping or take care of his apartment properly. My brother says I should have him move in with me. I've never had a good relationship with my father, so don't know what to do.

Answer: While it may seem to be cruel or insensitive, my advice is not to have your father move in with you and only do so as a last resort. Seek ways of helping him remain in his own apartment or look at alternatives, like senior apartment or assisted living.

That way he can still control his daily life. Self control can help his own self-esteem, which will be healthier.

All too often children scoop an aging parent up and move him/her from a familiar to an unfamiliar environment. The parent loses the feeling of being secure because of the displacement. And no one is happy

In your case, placing yourself in a potentially very stressful situation will be bad for both of you and may create unsolvable problems as he becomes frailer.

Question: After many years of being estranged from my father, 69, he has moved to a town nearby. My two sisters and brother live in the same area. Our mother passed away two years ago. I am having difficulty in dealing with him even though it seems he wants to take an active part in our family life.

Answer: Regardless of what happened in the past, your father is now reaching out to you to re-establish a positive relationship.

Rehashing your own negative feelings while growing up without him will not change the past nor achieve anything positive.

An honest exchange of feelings can be a starting point. You may learn things your mother never told you. Understanding the past can often go a long way to better relationships in the future.

Make believe you're meeting him for the first time. Get to know him as he is today. Give your father a new chance in life.