

THE SANDWICH GENERATION^{®™}: CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE By Carol Abaya, M.A.

The Sandwich Generation^{®™} is just that - people caught in the middle. Parents are still living, with special needs that must be addressed. Children and spouse have very different and sometimes conflicting needs. Grandchildren also often need care and always need loving. And what about The Sandwich Generation^{®™} itself? Its own individual needs as well as dreams?

Elder care is an issue that tears at the family fabric of our society. Caregivers experience real conflicts between loyalty, love, economics and self.

Demographics: generally aged 45 to 65, but can be older or younger. Found in every town and city across America. Found in every income level, from the richest to the poorest.

Traditionally the term “The Sandwich Generation^{®™}” related to those in the 45 to 64 age group. But reality confuses these numbers. People in their late 60s and even 70s are caring for relatives in the 80s and 90s. At the other end, people in their 30s and 40s - often the youngest female of several offspring - are caring for sick parents or grandparents. Or the child living closest to the parent is “chosen” to bear the heaviest burden. At the same time, 40% of these younger caregivers are bringing up their own children.

I coined the words “Club Sandwich Generation.” The various layers here include: the oldest family members, probably in their 80s or 90s; next are those in their 60s and 70s; then come those in their 30s to 50s, with fourth generation generally under 25.

Many women will spend more years caring for parents than for their children. At least one-third of all women now over 18 can expect to be lifetime caregivers - from their children’s cradles to their parents’ graves. Children by “growing up” move toward independence. The aged only become more dependent. If a child is sick, most often he or she will get better. What is hardest to accept is the fact that elderly and frail parents or a terminally ill spouse tend to deteriorate over time. One of life’s hardest passages is watching loved ones age. Sociologists say it changes forever the way you view them and the way you view yourself.

The act of trying to balance everyone’s needs is putting a new face on our society. There are unique pressures on society as a whole, and even more on each individual. Many along the way undoubtedly find they are unable to juggle priorities, maintain positive relationships with other family members, and achieve self-fulfillment and happiness.

Where We Are

While 19th century and early 20th century American households were “nuclear,” neighborhoods were extended families. So there were usually other family members to share the burden of taking care of the elderly. Family size has been shrinking, leaving fewer children to share responsibility and care for more aged. Since World War II, families have become more

geographically dispersed, and neighbors are no longer members of your own family. With the advent in the 1960s of retirement communities, particularly in New Jersey, Florida, the Carolinas, and Arizona, intergenerational contact has become separated from the daily business of life.

Interestingly enough, as elders lost authority within the society, they gained in the family sphere. Sociologists point out that ties of affection grew stronger as ties of obligation grew weaker. Natural bonds were strengthened as parent-children relationships became less authoritarian. Relations also changed between grandparents and grandchildren, with grandparents often being more indulging with grandchildren than they were with their own children.

While closer intergenerational relations were fostered by individual independence, today's phenomena may dramatically change this. As more elderly move in with their children and grandchildren, positive intergenerational relations may deteriorate.

The societal impact in the next decade, in particular, will come from the parents of baby boomers. As this group ages, the numbers become harder to handle "successfully." And with the youth cult dominating our society, the baby boomers may have more difficulty coping with aging than previous generations.

More than any previous generation, the baby boomers, especially the women, were encouraged to create their own identities and focus on their own needs. In previous generations, the dominant female role was that of nurturing others. Because of the changes in society, many are out of sync with their parents' lives and value systems.

From the purely emotional vantage point, many approach old age as a problem to be solved, rather than as a process to be understood. Many will feel even more frustrated and angry that they cannot control their own lives because of their parents' needs.

The Tolls Are Many

In the early 1900s, doctors began looking more closely at aging diseases, and geriatrics grew as a science. However, there has been no real breakthrough or revolution in treatment. Aging still cannot be "cured;" the process can only be eased, and people made more comfortable.

So with the numbers increasing dramatically, our aging population has clearly created an awesome challenge for society.

Dedicated care is expensive money-wise. However, the financial impact is only one aspect of the critical problem. Most often it is completely overshadowed by the emotional and physical tolls they exact from the caregiver, in particular, and the family as a whole.

In fact, the emotional toll cannot even begin to be calculated. We all go through a range of emotions, from love, resentment, compassion, anger, guilt, satisfaction, frustration and desperation.

When you deal with your children, you're the boss. When you deal with a parent, how often do you meet with resistance and outright refusal to cooperate? For our parents find it just as hard to relinquish their parental roles as it is for us, to become parents to our parents.

Emotions are just as strong on the part of the aging. Fear can take over: fear of illness, of being left alone, of becoming a burden on children or society, of being placed in an institution. Anger is another feeling held by the elderly. Anger that they can no longer do what they used to, that they need to depend on others for basic daily chores.

Economic Toll

The cost of providing people with quality of life care continues to skyrocket. The big question that will be asked even more in the future is, "Should society re-evaluate its basic priorities?"

Says Norman Daniels, Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Tufts University, in his book "Am I My Parents Keeper?" "We lavish life extending resources on the dying elderly as if we were meeting their most urgent medical needs... It is far from obvious that prolonging the process of dying in these ways meets an important health-care need. Often such care merely traps the elderly in treatments they and their families do not want. Even more common is a trap we create out of obligation we feel to do everything possible to "save" our parents or spouse, even if we would reject such treatment for ourselves, had we the choice."

But medical care is only one cost.

Daily care is another. To have full-time or even part-time help is extremely expensive. If the financial resources are not there to pay for an outside caregiver, the family members must take over. How many family caregivers ask themselves every day, "How long can I keep this up?" "How long can they go on?" How many in The Sandwich Generation^{©™} reach out for help and either the financial resources or the other people resources are not there?

Many in the younger Sandwich Generation are putting a hold on their own lives to care for a relative. They often are forced to stop working, thereby reducing both current and retirement incomes. The older Sandwich Generation caregiver gives up her or his own retirement income and enjoyment to care for or pay for care for a relative.

Giving up one's own work to care for an elderly relative is only one "human" aspect of aging and caring. As "empowerment" has become a buzz-word in the work place, so it also relates to the aging of our parents. "Empowerment" is also tied in with the concept "highest possible quality of life."

As The Sandwich Generation^{©™} becomes more concerned about parents' lifestyle, the objective should be to help them remain as independent as possible for as long as possible - safely. Independence helps maintain self-esteem, which generally impacts, in a positive fashion, overall health and well-being.

How to find a comfortable balance between helping parents remain as independent as possible, on the one hand, and caring for them, and one's spouse, children, grandchildren, job, and self, on the other hand, is one of our biggest challenges.☺