

A SANDWICH GENERATION^{©TM}:
A PARENT TO A PARENT
By Carol Abaya, M.A.

We now have the first whole generation of people living into their 80s and 90s. No one has been able to “rehearse” for becoming elderly, sick and/or frail, nor is anyone really prepared to take over and care for elderly parents and other relatives.

So being a Sandwich Generationer is a new role on stage of life for which no one can ever rehearse.

There are some who reject the idea of role-reversal -- that we become parents to our parents. But I am a believer that we do in fact become parents to our parents in some way or other.

Before we can better understand this, I must point out that we do need to be careful not to confuse tasks with roles. Tasks often symbolize roles, but are different. Tasks are what one does, as opposed to who one is in relation to others.

Changes in tasks and responsibilities result in a change of roles. This is the case with being a Sandwich Generationer. Tasks and responsibilities in relation to aging relatives change; hence the role changes, and we become parent to a parent.

Traditionally we move into new roles and through them automatically; without a lot of thought. As a Sandwich Generationer we have to consciously think about this role and how we play it.

Changing Roles

A role defines who you are; how you are seen; and what is expected of you.

Roles have been established over many years, and expectations have been set by society. Parameters of behavior have also been set by society.

From the second we are born to the time we die, we all are playing multiple roles. We may be a son/daughter; brother/sister; grandchild; niece/nephew; cousin; all at once, upon birth.

As we grow older, roles change, and new roles are added. There are about 30 different roles a person might play during a lifetime.

The Parent Role

For the purpose of our discussion here, let's take a look at the role of a parent, in both a relationship sense and the tasks performed.

A parent is someone who nurtures, protects, loves and respects someone else -- a child, another human being.

For an infant, a parent feeds, dresses, baths, changes diapers, loves, protects, and keeps safe.

As a child grows older, a parent helps the child learn to do new things, to become independent. At the same time, parents continue to love and respect a child's own personality, likes and dislikes.

As a child grows further, the parent is there to provide emotional support and encouragement to help the child do his or her "own thing."

As a parent, we often get upset with a child, frustrated, impatient that the child won't do what we think he or she should do. We also get angry. Tough feelings to deal with.

So as our parents become older, don't we continue to love them, want to protect them, keep them safe and independent? Don't we worry about them, that they're ok? Don't we nurture them and help them retain their own individuality and integrity as a human being? Depending on their physical and mental capabilities, we often have to feed, dress, bathe them, help them in and out of bed, and yes, maybe even change diapers.

As we did with our children, we get angry, frustrated, upset. But in a sense, can't we feel this way in any relationship? With a spouse? A friend? A sibling?

Role reversal in relation to aging parent care, depends on the tasks done. The love and respect we had when they were healthy and independent, when they did for us, is still there. But the tasks have changed; therefore the role has changed so we become a parent to our parent(s).

Feelings

Let's take a look at some of the sensitivities we face when our parents become elderly and start needing help. But first let's take a look at society's values in relation to tasks and feelings.

With children, society says it is ok to do these tasks and no one challenges you. It's ok to help kids learn how to do new things. It's ok to get angry and frustrated as kids struggle to develop themselves as people and may not "listen" to us.

In relation to our elders, society has not yet acknowledged that it's ok to do these tasks for parents and have the same feelings of frustration, anger, anxiety, and the desire to protect them - often from themselves.

While many of the tasks are the same, there is a very basic difference in the relationship.

With kids, the parent is the control point. They accept oversight, guidance, love, and behavior parameters, because they don't know any other way of doing things. And this is what society has established as the parental role.

With parents, it is quite different. They are mentally developed, independent human beings, who have controlled self and lifestyle for many years. Now they are losing the ability to do for self -- and they aren't very happy about this. They resent losses, are angry about themselves, and scared about the future.

Also the eldest generation -- most of our parents -- are fiercely independent, and often they are not very good at accepting help from others.

What To Do

It goes without saying that we could take pages and pages dealing with these implications and new role challenges.

Our objective has to be to empower our parents -- like we did previously with our children - - to help them retain their independence as long as possible. The worst thing Sandwich Generationers can do is to move into a parent's life like a bull in a china shop and take over everything. The less you do for a parent, depending on true physical and mental abilities, the better it is for everyone.

Whatever is done and whatever decisions are made must be done with the parent and not for the aging parent. The elder must be a true participant in the decision making process, and we must always keep in mind their values, concerns, likes and dislikes.

Part and parcel of lifestyle decisions is the control factor. Everyone wants to retain control of one's life, whether it be in relation to where one lives, or what one eats for breakfast and at what time. Our job as a Sandwich Generationer is to help the elder retain control of his/her own life and lifestyle as much as possible. 🍷

SKILLS FOR A SANDWICH GENERATIONER

It's natural that when a Sandwich Generationer has to start doing things for a parent that the "take over" syndrome comes into play. And it's hard not to act quickly to "get things done."

Being a good parent to a parent, like being a parent to a child, is not instinctive. It is a learned skill and often needs to be worked on, all the time.

While each relationship and scenario is different, two key words and the understanding of their implications can help Sandwich Generationers better handle this new role on the stage of life: acceptance and expectations.

Acceptance

Acceptance is the passport to better relations and self stress reduction.

Each person is inherently worthy of being accepted as he or she is by virtue of having been born into the human race. Each person's abilities are no "better" or "worse" than anyone else's. They are just different. What is important to remember is the value, the uniqueness of each person. No two people think alike. People have different preferences. Each person has different strengths and weaknesses.

Help an aging parent accept their strengths as well as weaknesses; to maintain the strengths and to be able to accept help in dealing with weaknesses.

Acceptance does not mean approving a parent's behavior. Acceptance should be aimed at the characteristics of the individual, rather than what the parent does or doesn't do.

Acceptance requires accepting others' feelings as well as their human characteristics. Sandwich Generationers also have to acknowledge their own feelings. If a person ignores or represses feelings, there can be severe internal tolls on body and mind.

So, get in touch with both the elder's and your own feelings. Accept them. Deal with them in constructive ways. Feelings influence behavior, but they do not automatically control it. The awareness of feelings gives a person more power to control events and relationships.

Expectations

The scope of human expectations is wide and may not only be unrealistic but also destructive. On the positive side, it may mean one person accepts another person's expectations without putting his own in front of him/her. On the destructive side, it may mean a person demands others to conform to his/her (unrealistic) standards of behavior or level of achievement.

So, Sandwich Generationers need to ask:

- are my expectations unrealistic given reality?
- how do my expectations impact my relationship with my parent?

In addition, if a parent says "I can't do...", is this reality? Or is he afraid to try because of possible failure, or of falling down, or something else.

Reinforcement of an elder's own feelings of self worth are very important. Show a parent you have faith in him and value him for who he is, not what he can do. At the same time, let him know you believe he has the resources to do as much as possible for himself.

If a person has trouble accepting the deteriorating condition of a parent and expectations are unrealistic, then the Sandwich Generationer needs to

- try to act as though he/she does accept the parent and does not expect anything more than that parent can do/give;
- make a conscious effort to broaden his/her own view of what is acceptable and doable; and
- bring his/her own ideal expectations more into line with reality. 🌱

NO ONE CAN PREVENT CHANGE

There are only two things in life that are absolute and no one can prevent them: change and death.

Change in relation to aging -- our parents and our own -- is going to happen whether or not we want it to or like it. How we deal with aging, how receptive we are to change and how we deal with it will determine stress levels.

Barbara Kovach, Ph.D., is Director of the Leadership Development Program at Rutgers University School of Business (NJ). Kovach focuses on human behavior and changes within a corporate environment. However, much of her philosophy and conclusions are very applicable to Sandwich Generation/parent care scenarios.

Individual thinking orientation and personality determine whether a person is more or less receptive to change. How one views change impacts awareness, acceptance and actions - and elder care.

A key element to successful parent care is the building of a team of care providers and of dividing up and assigning tasks to different people. In order to build a successful team using family members with different personalities, the primary caregiver needs to understand other's acceptance to change orientation.

Those people less receptive to change need concrete factual information with fewer "opinions" and personalization. Those more receptive to change can deal well with conceptual information with immediate personal application. Kovach notes that "all individuals are resistant to change to one degree or another."

Kovach's "change" process deals with three elements:

- awareness
- communication
- action

Awareness

"Resistance occurs first at the level of awareness," she notes. People pretend that what is reality "is not so." "We shut out this awareness."

But she says, "knowing is better than not knowing -- about ourselves and others. Most things are known, but we pretend we don't know. In order to learn, we must stop pretending, and this happens a little bit at a time."

Communication

Communicating the needs of the care recipient as well as the primary caregiver can be the lifeline to effectiveness and protection of the "I" Self or results in chaos and stress.

People can share knowledge and increase understanding, she says, or “Share the pretense and increase the range of distorted perceptions of things-as-they-are.” Distortions often arise from withholding information, especially bad news. Often parents hide illnesses or decreasing capabilities from children, especially if they live a distance away. At times, Sandwich Generationers see the need to share information with parents and siblings, but parents want to “pretend” all is well.

Thus people either share knowledge and create understanding, which in turn creates clarity about problems and potential solutions or, more frequently, share pretense and create only the appearance of understanding, which in turn, creates a distortion of reality for all concerned, she says.

Action

Kovach’s philosophy is that individuals vary in their readiness to act depending on their degree of openness to change. More open individuals will assume the initiative for action. They will take the first steps in implementing new ideas. Less open individuals will act within a familiar framework. Effective action is based on a clear awareness of things-as-they-are and an ability to communicate this awareness to others. Ineffective action is similar to ‘sound and fury signifying nothing.’

Action is paired with responsibility. With a clear awareness of problems and clear communication about those problems, pathways to problem resolution are often apparent to those involved.

Disowning such responsibility, thus, usually begins at the level of awareness with statements such as, “There is nothing I can do.” Consequently, no action ensues, or perhaps only the appearance of action.

Understanding Kovach’s philosophy can help the Sandwich Generationer and professionals dealing with Sandwich Generationers and their parents initiate positive change in relation to elder care.

Thus, awareness supports task accomplishment; whereas pretense and distortion support only the appearance of task accomplishments. Accomplishment is paired with responsibility; and pretense, distortion, and the appearance of action are paired with the avoidance of responsibility.

Individuals who are more aware, more easily exchange pretense for new awareness. Individuals who are less aware, are more resistant to such changes. Yet, all individuals resist giving up their old assumptions for new.

Kovach’s objective’s in helping people understand their own as well as others feelings about change and action are to

- increase awareness, which increases understanding and the perception of things as they are.
- decrease pretense, which reduces misunderstanding and distortions of things as they are.
- increase communication and individual understanding.
- increase acceptance of responsibility.

- decrease appearance of accomplishment and avoidance of responsibility.

In relation to siblings and other family members who need to be brought into the care cycle, Kovach notes, "Sharing the areas of awareness of each member increases understanding in the group and, at the same time, offers the possibility of increasing the areas of awareness within each individual. Drawing on the areas of awareness in each individual increases the potential for accomplishment by the group."👍

HOW TO JUDGE SELF WORTH

Ideal: standard of perfection or excellence; a model.

Taking on new responsibilities, especially if a person really has had no guidance as how to handle or deal with them can be tricky and stressful.

"All of us are apt to lose sight of ourselves, our likes and dislikes, under every day pressures. In many situations we frequently view ourselves as inadequate, measuring down the side of the glass as we count off the ways in which we fall short."

The above thought often follows parental care givers around every day.

Barbara Kovach is not a gerontologist. Her work deals with probably everything but aging. Kovach is the Director of Rutgers University Leadership Development Program. She has a Ph.D. in human development from the University of Maryland. Before joining Rutgers she was Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan.

In dealing with ideals, Kovach relates to what she calls false ideals and genuine ideals. It is often the false ideals that prevent people from doing whatever it is they want to do and feel comfortable about their doing. She uses the analogy (need to check meaning) of a half-empty glass and a half full one.

False ideals measure from the top down, taking note of what they have not, says Kovach. Genuine ideals measure from the bottom up, assessing how far they have come.

Kovach claims that false ideals are created from not understanding self and the current situation and are rather drawn from the past. And what happened in the past may not be relevant at all today. In addition, false ideals are often based on blacks and whites, of hard standards by which a person judges himself or herself. "We succeed or fail: we lived up to others' expectations or we have fallen miserably beneath consideration," Kovach explains. "This set of ideals begins with 'where we are not.'"

Genuine Ideals

On the other hand, genuine ideals grow out of understanding who we are and information about the current situation, she says. "In this sense, with genuine ideals, we evaluate progress in shades of grey. Genuine ideals join reality with 'what might be' and accept 'what is' as a preparation for 'what might be.'

Her basic premise is that if a person uses false standards with which to judge Self that failure is a given, that the person will never feel he or she has 'succeeded.' In relation to elder

caregiving, whether it be parental or spousal, if ideals -- standards -- are unrealistic, then the person will never feel comfortable with Self or with what he or she is doing for the elder.

“The foundation for genuine ideals is self-knowledge, awareness of one’s own strengths and weakness and recognition of what one ‘likes’ and does ‘not like’ doing. This is not as easy as it seems.” Kovach says. “We always have the option of basing our judgments on who we are, what we know of our own situation and or own talents and preferences. When we operate from genuine ideals, we are continually re-energized, remaining flexible and adaptive in a changing world. At these times, our glass is half full.”

Genuine ideals include flexibility and changing as situations and parental needs change. False ideals often keep a person from seeing what is actually going on and can lead to self criticism -- or criticism of others involved in the scenario.

Kovach points out that the willingness to examine ideals is “a courageous act. Courage is the willingness to go ahead in spite of fear. Yet often people down play courage as an important component of life experience. Courage helps us to examine current reality and to act on our beliefs.”

Share Who You Are

“As vulnerable human beings, we are all subject to feelings of rejection, inadequacy and/or not being like or loved. We feel stressed out. Yet, often we feel better if we share verbally our experiences with another. We can ignite sparks of joy in our existence when we connect with others in shared experiences,” Kovach says. However, she notes, many are reluctant to share feelings with others.

If a person holds onto a false ideal, a false standard, then the person measures Self against that standard and frequently finds Self falling short, Kovach says. People use a betterness or worseness criteria for judging Self. “We are either superior or inferior. Behind this judgment lies a standard that is usually something we have brought with us from the past, overly simplistic and generally unsuited to the complexity and variability of human lives.”

Because role reversal, having to become parents to parents, is such an emotional issue, many feel uncomfortable about talking about problems and negative feelings with others. However, sound advice from Kovach: sharing feelings and experiences with others allows a person to move away from false standards to genuine ones and to form new impressions from this new experience. This new experience then leads to more positive feelings about Self and the care receiver. 🍀