



Balancing Elder Care With Other Relationships

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, Minding Our Elders

Becoming a family caregiver is often something that either happens very suddenly or slowly sneaks up on a person. When a loved one has a health setback or begins needing more assistance, we tend to go into “crisis mode” and haphazardly shift our priorities around to ensure their immediate needs are met. Most family caregivers take on these responsibilities thinking they will be short-term commitments and that life will soon return to “normal.” But the reality is that caregiving can drag on for weeks, months and even years.

Without any solid plans or reprioritizing, things that were once at the forefront of your life, like your job, your friends and even your relationship with your significant other, can wind up on the back burner. Whether you are brand new to caregiving, you sense it is quickly approaching on the horizon or you’ve been in the trenches for months now, it’s never too late to reevaluate your priorities, make some changes to achieve a better balance in your life and repair relationships with the people you love.

The Effects of Caregiving on Friendships

When caregiving mode begins, the first things to go are the time, energy and desire to maintain social connections. Even close friendships that go back years can seem like yet another item on a caregiver’s never-ending to-do list.

So, caregivers stop extending and accepting invitations to socialize, cut phone calls short, and begin to drift away from their support systems. Although most try to be understanding of all the different directions a caregiver is being pulled in, friends still get tired of being canceled on or having caregiving dominate the conversation.

As caregivers focus on the tasks at hand, friends also begin to pull back and shift their efforts elsewhere. Before you know it, you haven’t heard from close connections or acquaintances in quite a while. By the time you realize you could use a helping hand or a venting session over a cup of coffee, you may find that your friendships have been damaged, possibly even beyond repair.

The Effects of Caregiving on Children

For sandwich generation caregivers, there are also children in the picture. I had two young sons when I began my stint of caregiving that spanned two decades and included the care of seven elders in total. I believe I gave my sons as much attention and care as any mother could, but I was always torn. It seemed that someone always needed me, and someone was always left feeling shortchanged.

What was I to do when one of my sons was sick and Mom fell and set off her personal alert device? How do you choose between two very pressing matters like these? Other times I’d be spending quality time with my boys only to be called away to run an errand or handle an emergency. Many sandwich generation caregivers find themselves in this tough predicament. My sons got used to me flitting from place to place trying to give everyone my attention and affection in between putting out fires.



It certainly doesn't hurt children to understand that their elders need and deserve care and that they must share their parents with older generations. In many cases, it can be beneficial for children to participate in their elders' care within reason. My kids probably encountered a little too much of this, but they survived.

However, some children face much tougher issues than mine did. Some have grandparents with dementia living with them, abusing them verbally or even physically. Others may seem to "lose" a parent entirely to caregiving during their formative years. These decisions are never easy, but it's important to remember that our kids only get to enjoy one childhood and we set the example of how to care for all family members and balance relationships.

The Effects of Caregiving on a Marriage

Lastly, caregiving can take a serious toll on romantic relationships. Many caregivers are fortunate to have understanding significant others, but there are many who do not have the full support of their partners. When your parents' care needs increase and disrupt everyday life for you and your family, it usually doesn't take long for your spouse to begin feeling some resentment towards their in-laws. Stress and feelings of neglect can build to dangerous levels, which can be intolerable for both sides. Marriages can and do break under [the stress of caregiving](#).

Setting Boundaries to Maintain Balance

The underlying question here is how much do adult children owe to their aging parents? Should they jeopardize their own health, their financial security or their family relationships? Where does "honoring your parents" begin and end?

I don't believe anyone should give up their whole life for the elders who raised them. In most cases, if parents could think straight, they wouldn't want that kind of sacrifice made for their benefit. However, they've often gotten to a point where they don't recognize the extent of their demands or the consequences they hold for their adult children and their families. So, they're bitter about not having their every need met and make that resentment well known.

This is where caregivers must take a stand. They must look to outside resources for assistance and respite. They must learn to set priorities that allow them to provide quality care for their elders, yet ensure they still have time, patience and energy for their children, their spouses and themselves. If this isn't done early on, then breaking the pattern will become harder and harder as time passes. For those caregivers who haven't established a balance yet, it isn't impossible to do after the fact. You can fine-tune your contributions and expectations, but it's notoriously difficult to get a senior to accept change once they've become accustomed to a certain way of life.

Certainly, if an elder is nearing the end of life, then the whole family should be able to make some sacrifices and gather around in support. But, if long-term caregiving is in order, it is crucial to set boundaries in an attempt to strike a balance. Without placing limits on your duties, all relationships involved will be damaged, even the relationship with your care recipient. Caregivers who feel they have given up everything for everyone else will eventually find that no one really got what they needed.

We Must All Support Each Other

Decades ago when women entered the workforce, there were ongoing debates about whether a proper work/life balance was possible for them. The discussions centered on juggling being a good wife, a nurturing mother and a productive employee. We've come a long way since then,



but people still struggle with growing family, work and social responsibilities. As people live longer, a daunting new task has been added to this list for both men and women: elder care. As a society, we are faced with increasingly difficult choices regarding childcare, careers, finances, romantic relationships, health care, friendships and elder care. Caregivers are responsible for setting and maintaining their own boundaries in order to keep themselves and their relationships with others healthy. BUT, the caregiving party is not always solely to blame when a relationship falls by the wayside. It takes the concerted efforts of two people to form a bond, nurture it and repair it from time to time.

Regardless of whether you are a family caregiver, a senior who needs help, a spouse of a caregiver or a friend to a caregiver, we should strive to be kind to and supportive of one another. Mutual understanding goes a long way to strengthen our connections. In genuine relationships, families and friends weather trials and tribulations together unconditionally. Things are not one-sided—both parties take turns picking up the slack, making concessions and sacrifices for one another. As a caregiver, if you don't have a person's full support despite your best efforts to remain close, then perhaps your bond wasn't as strong as you originally thought. This can be a painful realization, but understand that it can also be freeing one.

FROM DEL: I was extremely fortunate to have a partner that not only cared about our family, but also my parents. She was only working part-time, but she helped with meetings, doctor appointments, shopping, and so much more. I don't think I would have survived without her being by my side. I also believe, that this caring had a significant impact on her life and health and may have forced her to retire earlier than she wanted. Do NOT EVER let your caregiving get in the way of your marriage and family.



EXPERT

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About Carol Bradley Bursack, CDSGF

Over the span of two decades, author, columnist, consultant and speaker Carol Bradley Bursack cared for a neighbor and six elderly family members. Her experiences inspired her to pen "Minding Our Elders: Caregivers Share Their Personal Stories," a portable support group book for caregivers.

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