

The sandwich generation

Times are tough for those looking after aging parents and children who haven't left home

BY DAVID SHERMAN, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN OCTOBER 5, 2012 8:10 AM



Judy Cane, a 55-year-old financial planner, is part of the so-called sandwich generation of adults caught between looking after their parents and their children at once

Photograph by: JULIE OLIVER, OTTAWA CITIZEN

Some call it the sandwich generation.

But for those who are the meat in the metaphorical sandwich — boomers caring for older children and aging, ailing parents, juggling jobs and family commitments — it's more like being between a rock and a hard place.

The so-called sandwich generation are caregivers, tending ailing aunts and uncles, fathers and mothers, many of whom are suffering from dementia and a variety of ailments associated with our increasing longevity.

At the same time they have children at home who need help with homework or transport to hockey practice or basketball, who need a parent to make them dinner and help usher them into adulthood and deal with their adolescent angst.

The so-called sandwich generation also has jobs and bosses and friends and lives and spouses and much of it gets lost or pushed aside with the urgency of aiding an ailing, aging loved one to cope.

"We were a double-stacked sandwich, a triple quarter pounder," says Judy Cane, 55, an Ottawa financial planner. Cane can laugh at her predicament at times, but in the last few years she has been buffeted by her 15-year-old son's attempted suicide, her husband Ian's father's death and now her 78-year-old mother's various health issues.

"I feel guilty all the time that I can't be there with her and take her everywhere she needs to go," says

Cane. "Ian and I went through tough times and we always said we'd get through this. It put a lot of pressure on our marriage."

Cane and her husband are far from alone.

"There are three million family caregivers in Canada," says Victorian Order of Nurses CEO Judith Shamian, who works out of Ottawa. She estimates the care they provide is worth about \$25 billion a year.

In the U.S., the figures are staggering. A recent study reports that more than 26 per cent of Americans are considered caregivers. A 2009 study says more than 61 million Americans were carers and the monetary value of their services was pegged at \$450 billion annually.

Adult caregivers, says Shamian, suffer from more health issues than non-care givers, they work less, their positions are more tenuous because of absenteeism to attend a loved one, they can't accept transfers, and often reject promotions because of the increased workload.

Ola Moore, 51, looks after her 80-year-old mother who is afflicted with Alzheimer's. Her husband and she often sleep at her mother's because they can't afford to pay for the round-the-clock care her mother needs. Before her mother was ill, they tended to her ailing father who had suffered through two strokes before he died.

"We haven't had a normal life in the last 20 years," she says. "I can't even begin to explain. It gets too emotional. The wear and tear is beyond imagining. The effects are so huge. It's a challenge to a long-term marriage."

Moore says her husband is a big help but can't dress and bathe and toilet her mother, who becomes agitated when a professional caregiver visits so the bulk of the burden rests with Moore.

This situation is not uncommon, says Shamian, adding that it's usually the woman in the family who handles the majority of the work.

"The problem gets worse every year. People are having children later so they are getting squeezed," meaning the kids are still at home, especially these days when children stay at home longer than ever, when parents' health begins to fail.

Also, she says, more women are working out of the home, with less time to devote to parents and children.

And, of course increased mobility means many people no longer live in the same city as their parents and some divorced parents don't live in the same city anymore, either, meaning boomer caregivers often find themselves jetting or driving all over the country.

"Individuals in their 60s have children, grandchildren and older parents," says Shamian. "It's a very dark scenario, a recipe for disaster and it's a growing problem."

To stay in contact with her kids as she was struggling with her father, Moore ran a home daycare.

"Once your children are grown, you expect freedom. Your marriage is waiting."

But she found only more stress as her mother deteriorated.

"The emotional part is brutal," she says. "It never leaves me 24 hours a day. After a few days each week, I'm pretty broken down, exhausted emotionally and physically."

And it's not just her own toll that she's busy measuring — the aches and pains of hefting an elder woman in and out of bed or the bath — but the psychological torment and embarrassment helplessness inflicts on her mother.

"You have to try and balance their modesty and pride and not let them feel badly," she says.

Caitlin Brydges, who works with families for the Alzheimer Society of Ottawa and Renfrew, says families have to access help and support from various community organizations or they risk going under.

The VON's Shamian says navigating your way through a multitude of services from a variety of agencies that may or may not help can be a nightmare.

"You need a PhD to put it all together," she says. "It's all very confusing. What we need is one-stop shopping."

Moore has hired a person at \$20 an hour and gets 14 hours a week of help from the Ontario government. But she ends up spending between \$1,500 and \$2,000 every two weeks for care.

"But people who come in can't help her have a shower or toilet because she becomes agitated with strangers," she says. "So they can just sit there. I'm terribly discouraged."

Brydges says, "Generally all relationships are strained by a progressive chronic disease. All families are at risk from isolation. They are being stretched and pulled and not looking after their own health."

Cane who referred to herself as a triple-decker sandwich, makes time for her and her husband by escaping to their chalet and using the drive to talk and bond, their son, struggling with his own mental health issues, often asleep in the back seat.

Audrey Miller, who owns a for-profit support company called Elder Caring, says 85 years and over is a fast-growing segment of the population.

"We're not aging well," she says.

Miller, who is based in Toronto, provides professional consultation as to support services from social workers across the country for \$120 an hour, a kind of one-stop shop that the VON's Shamian advocates.

"We give referral and information," says Miller. "It's a maze out there."

Care for the elderly and aiding the families that are overwhelmed by it, is becoming a growth industry.

Pierrette Raymond, who owned a 1-800-got-junk franchise in Ottawa and Gatineau for 10 years, realized she was spending less time hauling away stuff and more and more time helping families sort through the belongings of deceased parents or elderly people who were downsizing or had to be moved to care facilities.

Two years ago, she started Moving Forward, a company that specializes in what she calls "home transition."

"With us, families can go on with their day-to-day lives," says Raymond. "Kids are busy with their careers and they can't do it themselves. We do it all for them," which means lifting, sorting, carrying and moving.

In fact, Raymond might be onto a trend. A study by retired Montreal social worker Nancy Gruberman, which looked at attitudes toward caregiving by those born in Quebec between 1945 and 1959, discovered that boomers often feel that they can be expected to provide care to aging family members. The amount of care is defined by the quality of the relationship they enjoyed with that person and the amount of conflicting commitments that often takes precedence.

Gruberman wrote that many were reluctant to assume hands-on care because it infringed on their lifestyles and social and family commitments.

Said one respondent to the study: "Our lives are organized in ways that don't include her. ... I feel like a real baby boomer! Very self-centred, but that's the way it is."

So the Ottawa families like Cane's and Moore's might well be the exception, the meat in the sandwich that accepts the role regardless of the price.

But as we age and more and more people and governments find themselves sorting through priorities and squeezed for money, who will be there for the young and the old?

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