“The Sandwich Generation”: Challenges of Caring for Parents, Children, and Yourself

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March 20th, 2012
“The Sandwich Generation”

- The term describing a generation of people who care for their aging parents while supporting their own children
- Merriam-Webster officially added the term to its dictionary in July 2006
- Tend to be in the 40 to 65 years of age group, BUT....
Generation, or Situation?

A SITUATION NOT A GENERATION.
"The Sandwich Situation": Gender Differences

- 75% of caregivers for older adults are women
- Typical sandwich-situation ‘member’ = working female caring for both aging parents and children
- Type of assistance provided
  - Men → financial support
  - Women → emotional support and daily tasks
Outline

- Challenges (and joys) of midlife
- Truth or myth? (i.e., what does the research show?)
- A real life example
- Tips and tools
  - Caring for your parents
  - Caring for your children
  - Caring for yourself
Challenges (and joys) of Midlife

- **Psychological**
  - A *transition*, not a crisis (for most)
  - Questioning the past and facing the future (“generativity”)
  - Increasing positive emotions
  - More likely to accept who you are and feel more in charge of situations and responsibilities

- **Physical**
  - Increasing body fat, high blood pressure, increasing cholesterol
“The Sandwich Situation”: Truth or Myth?

- Brody (1981): “women in the middle”
- Theme of caregiving research
- But is it real??
- Debate:
  1. Is there really a high incidence and prevalence of this demographic?
  2. Are these multiple roles necessarily stressful, and/or could they be satisfying?
Demographic Trends

- People live longer (more midlife adults have surviving parents)
- People delay marriage and having children
- Declines in fertility (fewer caregivers available)
- More adult children are choosing to live at home during college years
- Proportion of midlife women in the workforce has increased
The Sandwich Situation: Actual Prevalence/Incidence?

- 44% of married individuals aged 35 to 44 both live with children and have at least one parent in fair to poor health (Marks, 1998)
- 33.9 million Americans (16%) provide care for an older family member
- Parent care + dependent child + working = 8% of American women and men (Rosenthal et al., 1996)
The Sandwich Situation: Actual Prevalence/Incidence?

- A *New York Times* article from 2008 reported that there are 20 million Americans (mostly women) who are juggling responsibilities for their own children and their aging parents at the same time.
  - 53% of those women reported feeling forced to choose (at least once a week) between being there for their children or being there for their ailing parents.

- Pew Research Center: 1 out of 8 Americans aged 40 to 60 are raising a child and caring for a parent.

- Although the majority of adults are *not* “sandwiched,” it will likely become increasingly prevalent given current demographic trends.
The Sandwich Situation: Good or Bad?

- Holding multiple roles:
  - Role strain theory vs. role enhancement theory vs. role context theory

- Role Context Theory
  - Caregiving $\Rightarrow$ ↑ mastery for women in 50s and 60s, but not in late 60s and 70s
  - For women, caregiving + work > caregiving alone in terms of psychological well-being
  - For men, help to parents $\Rightarrow$ ↑ distress, but less so when combined with employment; help to adult children and parents $\Rightarrow$ ↓ life satisfaction (women less affected by multiple roles, either positively or negatively)
The Sandwich Situation: Good or Bad?

- In sum, psychological health effects (negative or positive) are small
- Caring for parents, in particular, can be an unexpected, unpredictable, and frustrating stressor → it is a nonnormative, unanticipated demand
- If the sandwich situation is viewed increasingly as ‘normative,’ coping strategies may be positively influenced…
  - e.g., having a strong sense of support and care from community, using acceptance strategies, focusing on positive outcomes
- **BUT**…recent research shows that there may be negative health effects (Chassin et al., 2010)
The Sandwich Situation: Good or Bad?

- The not-so-good feelings of being in the sandwich…
  - Guilt, resentment, fear and anxiety, anger and frustration, confusion/ambivalence, depression/sadness
  - Torn between love and resentment, between duty to parents and duty to spouses and children, between wanting to do the right thing and not wanting to change their lives

- The good feelings of being in the sandwich…
  - Honor, respect, pride/joy, love

- The wide range of emotions is common when caring for an aging parent and being “sandwiched”
A “real life” example...

- "The Sandwich Generation"
Tips and Tools: Caring for your Parents

- Maladaptive functioning in adult relationship likely stems from maladaptive functioning in earlier relationship...
  - Forgiveness must be conscious effort (self-awareness, personal therapy, active reflection)
- Role reversal → emotional turmoil
  - Disappointment, anger, guilt
  - Anxiety over parents’ mortality and worry about their own mortality
Tips and Tools: Caring for your Parents

- Making decision about care location
  - Put them in the drivers’ seat
  - Let them parent you
  - Bring in the experts
- If hiring a professional provider, get references, and contact them!
- If you don’t have money to pay for professional help, and don’t feel comfortable asking friends, turn to volunteers
  - Churches, senior centers, 4H clubs, HS community service organizations, colleges that train nurses and social workers (like Adelphi!)
  - Let volunteers sort mail, go grocery shopping, do laundry, pay social visits, help them at mealtime, drive them to appointments
Tips and Tools: Caring for your Parents

- Be proactive
- Try to involve parent in day-to-day household tasks/chores, even if very simple
  - Wiping off table after dinner
  - “supervising” the children
- Scheduled/spontaneous activities with grandchildren
- “Special moment” each day, separate from children
Tips and Tools: Caring for your Parents

- If parent is in an assisted-living center or nursing home, get to know other adult children with family members there
- Use online tools to get help with healthcare issues
  - e.g., Web MD offers a “Ask the Dr. Checklist”
- Take advantage of assistive technology
  - If insurance company says ‘no,’ ask doctor to write a letter
Tips and Tools: Legal Intervention

- Legal intervention may become necessary when parents can no longer handle their own financial and practical affairs
- Mentally competent parents (capable of making decisions and understanding consequences)
  - Bank account held jointly with adult child
  - Living trust or trust account with automatic inheritance
  - Power of attorney
- Declaration of legal incompetence
  - Guardian controls ward’s property and person
  - Adults should specify in advance (i.e., in a will) the person they want to act as guardian in case of becoming mentally incompetent
Tips and Tools: Caring for your Parents with Dementia

- Dementia: development of multiple cognitive deficits including memory impairment
  - 12+ illnesses with similar symptoms but different causes (Alzheimer’s most common)
  - Rate doubles every 5 years after age 75, with 8.5% of people ages 85 to 89 affected; mild dementia affects almost 30% after age 90

- Researchers have found that a person who provides care for someone with dementia is twice as likely to suffer from depression as a person providing care for someone without dementia
Tips and Tools: Caring for your Parents

- To cope with impending loss:
  - Stay in the moment
  - Manage your own fears about death and dying (counseling?)
  - Manage your own feelings about the past
  - Express your love often, if you can
  - Remember to say what needs to be said now
  - Be with your parent where he/she is
  - Celebrate small things
  - Reminisce
  - Find joy
Tips and Tools: Caring for Your Children

- *Talk* with children and prepare them
  - Need for support
  - Future plans and adjustment
  - Love

- Financial woes: being frugal, cutting costs, and teaching children a valuable lesson
Tips and Tools: Caring for Your Children

- Take moments out to express how much you love and value your children (“special moment” each day)
  - Sit with child at breakfast every morning (routine)
  - Say a word of praise each morning
  - Put a note in your child’s backpack
  - Have dinner consistently at the same time every night when possible
  - Help with homework (don’t nag)
  - Assign chores, and give praise when they are done
  - Have a consistent bedtime hour and sit with child when he/she goes to bed
Caring for your Children: Warning Signs...

- Pre-school/Elementary kids:
  - Withdrawn
  - Depressed
  - Isolated (can’t get them to open up)
  - Regressive -- thumb sucking, soiling
  - Anxious -- clingy, poor sleep/eating, irritable
  - Frequent fighting/aggression/acting out
Caring for your Children: Warning Signs...

- Middle School (and beyond)
  - Sleeping poorly, nightmares
  - Depressed/withdrawn
  - AVOIDANCE (school bus, lunch room, absenteeism)
  - Anxious -- pacing, nightmares
  - Substance abuse
  - Somatic complaints: headaches, stomachaches, visits to the RN office often
  - Frequent fighting/aggression/acting out
Tips and Tools: Caring for Yourself

- **Don’t be a ‘martyr’**
  - Self-pity is unhelpful (negativity does not change the situation, only depletes energy)

- **Do not do it alone; ask for help! Why?**
  - Can provide an opportunity for relief (respite)
  - The person who is asked will feel needed
  - Caregiver will feel less isolated
  - Recipient of help may benefit from having a “fresh” helper

- Let go of unreasonably high standards, if necessary

- Return favors (if you can) and give “thank you”s!
Tips and Tools: Good News about asking for Help

- Research shows that caregivers with adequate community support report many dimensions of personal growth!
  - More empathic, caring, understanding, patient, compassionate, closer to person they are caring for, more appreciative of own good health
Tips and Tools: Caring for Yourself

- Take respite: yearly vacation, plus weekly and daily respite
- Nurture your partner
  - Establish a routine…
  - …but expect interruption
- Ask employer for more flexible work schedule, possibly leave provisions
  - Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993
- Counseling, online support, self-help groups
Tips and Tools: Caring for Yourself – Depression

- Caregivers are at particular risk for mild to severe depression
- Symptoms:
  - Change in eating habits (unwanted weight gain or loss) or sleep patterns (too much sleep or not enough); feeling tired all the time
  - Loss of interest in people and/or activities that once brought you pleasure
  - Becoming easily agitated or angered; feeling that nothing you do is good enough
  - Thoughts of death or suicide, or attempting suicide
  - Ongoing physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment (e.g., headaches)
- 41% of women who experience symptoms do not seek treatment for depression because they are embarrassed or in denial
- Depression deserves to be treated with the same attention afforded any other illness, such as diabetes or high blood pressure; it is essential to seek help
“The Caregiver’s Creed”  
(Bertini, 2011)

- I have choice.
- I will put myself first.
- I will take time for myself and my partner.
- I will establish a routine.
- I will ask for help.
- I can say yes, maybe, later, or no.
- I will pay attention to my own feelings and needs.
- I will remind myself that this is my one life to live.
- ? (personal)
Tips and Tools: Balancing Act

- Do *not* segregate dual responsibilities
- Organization is *key* (schedules and routines)
- Appreciate those who care
  - Small gifts, thank yous
- Hold family meetings
- Encourage open *communication* between children and elders
- Grandparent/grandchild activities
Summary: Five Survival Tips

- Draw strength from your faith
- Set aside time for yourself
- Seek family support
- Talk to your employer
- Get professional assistance
Thank you!

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Questions?