

SOCIETY'S NEWEST PEER GROUP: THE SANDWICH GENERATION

It was September, football season, and my husband and I had just attended a middle-school football game where our youngest son was a team member. Thank goodness team player doesn't always mean your activity is on the playing field!

Both his father and I had always been at every sporting event he played in and this evening was no exception. As was customary to feed a hungry young man in an expedient manner and celebrate his team spirit, we stopped at a local Italian restaurant for pizza. Since we were close to home, I called our oldest son, a senior at Douglas Anderson, to join us for dinner. During our brief conversation, he asked me if I had checked the "messages" (on the answering machine). (This was unusual because I normally had to ask *him* if there were any calls!) I told him no and questioned why he wanted to know. He told me there was a message from Grandma Ida. He couldn't make out what she was saying - she was crying.

As I write these words my heart again begins to race just like it did that very night. You see, Grandma Ida was in a nursing home because as her family, we did not financially plan for this live event, leaving her at the mercy of a system, Medicaid, where the only needed care she could have was at a nursing home. The life of my family pretty much revolved around her care and well-being. Immediate fright and panic (not an unfamiliar feeling) began to bubble inside me. I asked our son to play the message again.

Although the voice on the other end of the phone was hysterical and pleading, it was unmistakably Grandma Ida, my mother. Amidst her sobs came the words "Help me, Lynette; please help me. I've been beat up!" I believed that my darkest fears of someone abusing my mother while in a nursing home had come true. What had started out as a celebration dinner for my son turned into a night of confusion while we tried to calm my mother, and find out what had happened and why. We soon learned that an Alzheimer's patient had wandered into mother's room and began slapping her in the face, threatening to tear her eyes out. With no one around and incapable of physically defending herself, mother was terrified;

yet had the presence of mind to call me. I immediately had to shift my focus from our youngest son to my mother.

This tug of war of my time between my mother and children entitled me to membership in the “sandwich generation”. To qualify, I was not only a mother to two teen-aged sons and a wife with a job outside my home, but also a care-giver to my aging mother. I was “sandwiched” between the two generations. The term “sandwich generation” may be new to many of you even though you may already be one of its members. With our society living longer each and every year and baby-boomers reaching age 50, more and more of us will find ourselves a paying member of this fast-growing peer group. As one mother put it “...The teens fight for control and independence, and my mom fights not to lose it.”

Just like kid’s don’t come with instruction manuals, neither do our aging parents. We have learned, though, that women are the primary care givers for aging parents - their own or their in-laws. Resulting from this new responsibility as a parent’s care-giver, is another surge of that emotion we have all come to know and hate: GUILT. Women are shifting from feeling guilty because they are working *mothers* to feeling conflict and stress because they are *working daughters*. The guilt can be overwhelming: having to spread their love and time between work, kids and more. Care-giving is another item on our already busy calendars that we did not expect; and, more than that, are most often not emotionally equipped to handle.

The facts about long-term health care are sobering realities that most of us baby-boomers don’t want to hear. We must not only **hear** them, we must acknowledge and **expect** them. The average woman today will spend slightly more time caring for aging parents than she does for her own children. She will most certainly contemplate having grandma or grandpa move in with her family. This conjures up many more questions: *"How will the kids react to playing their favorite music at reduced decibels? How will we afford this with college looming in the near future.? I never got along with mom before; what’s going to happen now? Does dad “want” to live with us and have us watch his unsteady hands try to do normal daily activities like eating?"*

But, as one baby-boomer Jacksonville daughter is quickly learning, parents don't necessarily *want* to live with their children! My friend, who has medical problems of her own, has been designated the primary care-giver for a parent because of her seemingly "flexible" work schedule. Although the major concern is for the safety and well-being of her aging parent, my friend gets resistance. Efforts for her parent to consent to having home health care, moving into an assisted living facility, or moving in with her daughter and son-in-law are seen as trying to run her parent's life! Although my friend doesn't have children of her own, she is beginning to learn first hand the role of parenting, albeit reversed. Her answer: "My parents should have planned for their future." Both my friend and her husband see this experience as their call to action to **plan** for *their* long-term health care future.

Not all "sandwiched" life-styles are met with opposition, however. Take the Neptune Beach family of three generations. At age 72, "grandma" has been living with daughter, son-in-law, and grandsons for almost 5 years. Although she is wheel-chair bound and experiencing early signs of dementia, living in an intergenerational family has given this grandmother an opportunity to know her grandsons in ways she never would have been able to otherwise, instilling in them a love of reading and poetry. (Not to mention her sympathetic ear and safety zone in times of trouble with their parents!) For the grandsons, the living arrangement is teaching them responsibility and a proper sense of value in caring for others.

The "sandwiched" daughter's only difficulty is dealing with the thanklessness of her task. But it's not that "grandma" doesn't appreciate the love and care of her daughter; it's the dementia that has silently robbed her of realization and the ability to show gratefulness...".....like having a child that will never grow up". In this family, however, one emotion runs strong: love. And it was "grandma" who taught her daughter love - the ingredient that makes this "family" work.

The issue of the “sandwich generation” caring for elderly parents is fast becoming of major concern to employers and employees, too. In 1995, there were nearly 1,000 employer-sponsored long-term care programs in place in the United States. As we baby-boomers approach 50, elder care will replace child care as the #1 dependent issue for employees. Eastman-Kodak Company recently surveyed workers to discover that three-fourths will be caring for elderly relatives or children by 1997! Some companies have even begun to consider and accommodate for this new responsibility in its employee transfer packages.

The “sandwich generation” stress doesn’t end immediately once an elderly parent is no longer living; it lingers like post-partum depression. Mine does. When mother passed away on April 4 I was very much an active “sandwich generation” associate. I could have been with her the morning she died; but instead I was in Washington, DC with my son looking at colleges. I was squeezed between the needs of the young and the old - between what I *needed* to do and what I *wanted* to do.

The day before I left, I told mother where I was going and that I would see her on Monday when I returned. I knew her time on this earth was short but prayed that she heard me and understood. I’ll never know if she did. I do know that if she *did* hear me, she would have sent me off with her blessing; she was that type of mother.

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