

Care for the Caregiver

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Balancing work and family care is an increasing challenge for NSTU members. The growing reality is that many members are in the category of “employed caregivers,” which is a caregiver who is employed full-time but also provides caregiving to family members. Caregivers provide care to family members in their own home or in the recipient’s home. This is a familiar reality for members who try to balance the demands of personal work and the additional responsibility of looking after an elderly relative.

According to Statistics Canada, the “sandwich generation” is made up of 30 per cent of Canadians age 45 to 64, whom are simultaneously responsible for their still-dependent children under 25 and their aging parents. Many Baby Boomers are part of the “club sandwich category,” as they’re responsible for grandchildren and grandparents too. Almost one in five employed Canadians have responsibility for both childcare and eldercare. One in four have responsibilities for the care of elderly dependents. This percentage is predicted to grow as the Baby Boom population ages. The caregiving for elderly dependents is usually provided for relatives who live nearby or in another location. This reality is reflected in the concerns of members who request counselling to address the concerns of managing this challenge.

The caregiving is influenced by a desire as a “labor of love” as well as the urgency of knowing “there is no one else who can do it”. Members of the teaching profession tend to be nurturers and often assume the caregiving roles in their families. The roles of caregiving include providing physical care and emotional support, as well as coordinating the care. This can put the caregivers at risk for “caregiving strain” including physical, financial and emotional burdens.

A recent study sponsored by Desjardins Financial indicates that more Baby Boomers and Generation Xers are likely to fall into the sandwich generation as they delay parenthood and their parents live longer.

Also with smaller family sizes, there are fewer family members to share the responsibilities of caring for aging parents, and relatives. The consequence is that many employees are getting worn down by demands on their time and a decreasing ability to separate work-life domains. Their research indicates that more men are becoming caregivers, however women are still the main caregivers. A high percentage (63 per cent) that survey respondents who are caregivers reported emotional consequences of juggling work and looking after family. The outcomes were stress, anxiety and frustration.

According to a recent IRPP publication, the types of support provided by caregivers for the aging is categorized into four areas. These include:

- Instrumental activities of daily living such as cooking, shopping, housework and home maintenance.
- Assistance with activities of daily living such as bathing, dressing, grooming, and administering medications and injections.
- Management of care as in finding out about and arranging for delivery of formal and informal services.
- Social and emotional support provided to the care receivers and other caregivers and arranging and participating in social events to promote social engagement of the care receiver.

Providing this level of care can become very overwhelming and tilt the caregiver’s work life balance in an unhealthy direction. Juggling home and work duties can lead to life on overload and symptoms of burnout.

In counselling session with members who are caregivers, the most common troubling emotion expressed is guilt.

Members express a desire to do more, coupled with stress that results from limited time and overwhelming requests. The guilt goes with the territory and members are encouraged to replace the phrase “I feel guilty” with the term “I wish I could.” This turns “I feel guilty that I can’t spend more time with my mother,” to “I wish that I had more time to spend with my mother.” Inappropriate guilt can drain the energy and time that is available. The caregiver usually has an honest desire to provide care and is doing the best they can. Feeling inappropriate guilt will interfere

with efforts to build bridges and creative problem solving for structuring the care.

The question then is how to find coping mechanisms that allow us to do the best we can, to make our parents’ lives as comfortable and meaningful as possible, while

managing to have a life of our own. How do we reduce caregiver strain so that we can have a healthier work life balance? A review of help guidelines focuses on the following areas:

Plan Financially – Organize the financial situation in advance if possible. The difficult discussions of what level of care will be possible should be addressed before the parent needs extra care. Involve a financial planner in these discussions, and hold these discussions when the seniors are in good health and can discuss the issues rationally.

Address Your Stress – Have a realistic view of the demands and your personal resources. Acknowledge your feelings of anxiety, sadness, loss, guilt and also possibly resentment. Organize and delegate unreasonable expectations about what you can provide. Your own personal needs must be balanced with the needs of the person you’re caring for.

Take Care of Your Health – To provide

care from a healthy position, it is important to exercise, eat well and get plenty of rest. This may seem impossible, but efforts must be made, so that you are able to provide care over a period of time. Monitor yourself for signs of burnout.

Take Advantage of Community Services – You can coordinate care without having to provide it directly. Many services can be purchased or delegated to other family and friends or volunteer organizations. Become familiar with the health care maze and work as a team with health care professionals.

Accentuate the Positive – Remember the intention that you have in caring for the individual. This is usually based in honoring the contribution that the parent has made in your life and a desire to treat the person with dignity. This period of life can actually bring you closer to family members. You can find joy in caregiving and satisfaction from managing the care of a loved one.

We are breaking trail in a way that the previous generation didn’t experience. This includes challenges and rewards. Hopefully we’ll become role models for the caregivers that we’ll need in our future. For further assistance in moving toward a healthier work life balance feel welcome to contact Counselling Services of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union.

Resources for further reading:
Parenting Your Parents, Support Strategies for Meeting the Challenge of Aging in the Family, Bart J. Mindszenty and Michael Gossion, M.D.

The Eldercare 911, Question and Answer Book, Susan Beerman, MS, MSW, Judith Rappaport, Musson, CSA.

Doris inc. A Business Approach to Caring for Your Elderly Parents, Shirley Roberts.



The Early Intervention Program (EIP) invites NSTU members to sign up for our Wellness email list at Be_Well@nstu.ca

Please contact Erin at ekeefe@staff.nstu.ca and provide your NSTU email address. This list provides information about the EIP and other wellness topics.

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