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Switching Parenting Roles

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by Stuart Low

Caregivers' Stress

A major challenge facing long-distance caregivers is insidious stress. The phone rings late at night and instantly they suspect the worst. Is it a frantic health aide two time zones away, or worse, a tearful message-bearer?

These adult children live under a storm cloud visible to their friends and co-workers. It rarely lifts because the parents' experienced are imagined rather than seen. Can you really trust an inexperienced home health aide whom you've never met?

Even a reassuring telephone call doesn't clear the doubts.

"People fake it over the phone by saying 'Hey, everything's fine.'" says Sister Anne Maloy of Mercy Center with the Aging.

Children's anxiety is often more acute when the parents live by themselves. But even assisted care facilities don't eliminate fears about welfare.

One elder care manager singles out a particularly vulnerable group she call the "sandwich generation."

"These are people taking care of parents and teenage children at the same time," says Karen Witkowicz of Webster. "That makes it really hard to divvy up attention and some teens feel they're getting short shrift."

Work can also suffer if you lavish too much energy on long-distance caregiving.

"If you cut your hours at work your incomings reduce and your career can suffer," says Marsha Raines, who heads a team of geriatric care consultants on Monroe Avenue. Vacation time – the days you rely on to decompress – sometimes also must be used for regular visits or to address parents' urgent need. Sister Maloy believes that employers need to realize more fully the

strains of caring for elders. The Mercy Center will start an educational program for local workplaces with Blue Cross/Blue Shield this fall.

Finding Support

Maloy and other caregivers emphasize the importance of setting up a strong support system where your parents live. This should embrace legal, financial and medical planning, with professionals ready to step in when you can't be there.

Linda Jahn, a New York City lawyer, urges adult children to frank legal discussions before their parents are seriously ill. She advises drafting a basic enduring will, an enduring power of attorney and a health proxy.

"If you have a trusting relationship, your parent will want you to do it," says Jahn, who cared for recently deceased Rochester aunt. "Then you'll know what their wishes are and where their documents are."

If parents are mentally challenged, a blend of tact and bluntness may be needed to make decisions, by phone or in person.

"Be as specific as possible," urges Raines. "For instance, say 'Mom, I'd like you to try meals on wheels for a week.' Or 'Mom I'd like you to start visiting assisted care facilities. Here are brochures on four places.'"

She and other counselors also offer long-distance caregivers frequent advice on money management. The topic comes up frequently if families have a member in a nursing home or assisted care facility. Money cost can range from \$4,000 to more than \$7,000. In some cases, facilities require an initial payment of \$200,000 to \$300,000 to cover basic costs, plus monthly maintenance fees of \$1,000 to \$1,500.

"The majority of people we work with have less then \$200,000, so finances have to be looked at carefully," says Maloy. "People going into assisted living could use up all their money and end up on Medicaid."



Karen Witkowicz

Seniors who choose to live at home often need visiting health aides, a cost that builds up rapidly.

"You could be looking at \$10 to \$22 an hour," says Lebowitz. His late mother had aides for house work and personal care, and his father has a housekeeper from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. daily.

Should adult children foot those costs? That's a prickly issue with baby boomers struggling to save for their own retirements.

"Try to find some way to provide help without the kids paying," says Witkowicz. If siblings live in distant cities, they might take turns flying or driving in to visit their parents.

"My daughter-in-law, Judy Shanzer, comes in from New-Jersey every three months," says Annette Osband, 86, of Brighton. "She's an unbelievable woman and loves to take me shopping when she's here."

Grappling with parents' financial, legal medical issues may seem overwhelming, cautions Sister Maloy. But the satisfaction can match the steep demands she says:

"It's the dignity and respect I give my mother and father because of what they gave me."