



# Caregiving and the Sandwich Generation

The term *sandwich generation* refers to young to middle-aged adults who are simultaneously raising children and supporting their aging parents. More than one in 10 parents in the United States also care for an adult, spending about three hours each day on caregiving duties between their children and parents.<sup>1</sup> Being a sandwich generation caregiver can be exhausting, expensive, and emotional; juggling it all isn't easy, but there are ways to make it easier.

## FAST FACTS

- ▶ An estimated **11 million** caregivers (28% of all caregivers) provide **unpaid care to an adult while also caring for children** in the home.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ The typical **sandwich generation** caregiver was **born between 1965 and 1980** and is **more ethnically diverse, younger, and newer to caregiving** than other caregivers.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ Roughly **a third** of sandwich generation caregivers report a **high level of emotional stress** and a **fifth** report **high levels of financial and physical strain**.<sup>4</sup>

## COMMON STRESSORS

### Little to No Personal Time

Parenting and caring for an aging parent both take a lot of time and energy on their own – when you're in the middle and trying to do both, it can feel impossible to make time for anything other than caring for others. Sandwich generation adults are more likely than other adults to say they are pressed for time,<sup>5</sup> but it is possible – and crucial – to reserve time for yourself.

- Prioritize getting (and staying) organized – the seemingly constant demands can feel overwhelming, so plan regular family meetings to talk about upcoming commitments, delegate tasks, and get everyone on the same page.
- Don't be afraid or intimidated to ask for help – you'll likely be surprised by how many people are happy to support you and aren't sure what you need. Call on friends and neighbors when you need a break.
- If you have siblings, get them to help with costs, hands-on care, and spending time with your aging parent so that your role as a caregiver doesn't take over your entire life.

### Family Discord

Providing care for an aging parent is often stressful – while it can be a time for siblings and other relatives to come together and provide mutual support, the transition often brings out intense emotions. You'll probably find yourself having disagreements with other family members about parental care decisions, financial responsibilities, and even bringing up old childhood disputes.

- Be honest and direct about your feelings – approach caregiving conversations with as much patience and grace as possible and let your other family members know that their help is both wanted and needed.
- Be realistic about what help others can provide and be clear on your expectations from them (and ensure you understand *their* expectations).
- Try to see things from each other's points of view, respect differing opinions, and compromise where you can. If the situation is particularly tense, arrange for a conversation with a mediator (like a therapist, social worker, or other trusted third party) who can make sure that everyone is heard and respected.

### Dealing With Complex Emotions

While you may be your parent's caregiver now, you're still their child. Experiencing the role reversal so directly can bring about a lot of [big feelings](#). You might be experiencing anticipatory grief – anxiety, dread, or sadness as you await their passing. You may also feel a sense of loss of your independence as you're increasingly needed as a caregiver, which can bring up feelings of guilt. Anger and resentment are common, too. All of these feelings are normal when facing such challenging circumstances.

- Sharing what you're going through is often one of the best ways of healing. You can do this in whatever way feels right to you – with a support group, a therapist, a trusted friend, or in a journal that no one will ever read – but putting your thoughts and feelings into words is a great way to start processing them.

- Make sure you're attending to your own needs; while your child and parent may need you, you're in a highly emotional situation and deserve to let yourself grieve.

## Feeling Like A Failure

It can be impossible to live up to your own standards when you have so much on your plate. As a sandwich generation caregiver, you might feel like you can't be the parent you want to be to your children or the caretaker you want to be to your parent – there's only so much you can do in a day, and perfection just isn't achievable.

- Try not to be too hard on yourself – you are in a very uniquely challenging situation and doing the best you can looks different each day.
- Pay attention to avoid black-and-white thinking; just because you didn't do something exactly the way you intended doesn't mean it wasn't worth doing or that you failed.
- Acknowledge all that you *have* done and know that if you've fallen short on some things here and there, following through on the big things is what matters.

## Navigating Cultural Expectations

Different cultures and families have varying norms and expectations when it comes to older adult care. BIPOC individuals are more likely to consider caregiving to be a cultural expectation, and for many, there's no real decision to be made about whether to take on caregiving responsibilities – it's simply a given. If you're a caregiver in this situation, you may feel more alone than others, especially if your workplace, friends, or other support systems don't understand your obligations. It's also common to feel some resentment or bitterness about feeling pushed into this role.

Lean on your family or other members of your cultural community during times like this – it's likely they've been in a similar situation and experienced that same feelings that you're dealing with now. Make time to connect with your parent as their child – go for a walk, run non-care-related errands, or do something else that doesn't have your caregiver identity front and center.

## Taking Care of Yourself

Caring for an aging parent and parenting your own child at the same time is heavy – a lot of emotion, energy, and coordination go into each independently, and it can be especially difficult to try to manage both at the same time. If you're doing your best to manage as a sandwich generation caregiver and you consistently feel like you can't stay afloat, take a mental health screen at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) to determine if you're dealing with symptoms of a mental health condition.

---

### Sources

<sup>1</sup>Livingston, G. (2018, November 29). *More than one-in-ten U.S. parents are also caring for an adult*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/11/29/more-than-one-in-ten-u-s-parents-are-also-caring-for-an-adult/>

<sup>2</sup>National Alliance for Caregiving & Caring Across Generations. (2019). *Burning the Candle at Both Ends: Sandwich Generation Caregiving in the U.S.* [https://www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/NAC-CAG\\_SandwichCaregiving\\_Report\\_Digital-Nov-26-2019.pdf](https://www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/NAC-CAG_SandwichCaregiving_Report_Digital-Nov-26-2019.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>National Alliance for Caregiving & Caring Across Generations. (2019). *Burning the Candle at Both Ends: Sandwich Generation Caregiving in the U.S.* [https://www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/NAC-CAG\\_SandwichCaregiving\\_Report\\_Digital-Nov-26-2019.pdf](https://www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/NAC-CAG_SandwichCaregiving_Report_Digital-Nov-26-2019.pdf)

<sup>5</sup>Parker, K. & Patten, E. (2013, January 30). *The sandwich generation: Rising financial burdens for middle-aged Americans*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2013/01/30/the-sandwich-generation/>