

‘Caregiving’ it all: When taking care of mom and dad impacts work-life balance

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By Devon Merling, Deseret News National Edition



Much of the media focus on work-life balance has covered how to juggle a career and raise children, but similar personal and professional sacrifices can be required of those who support aging parents. (Shutterstock)

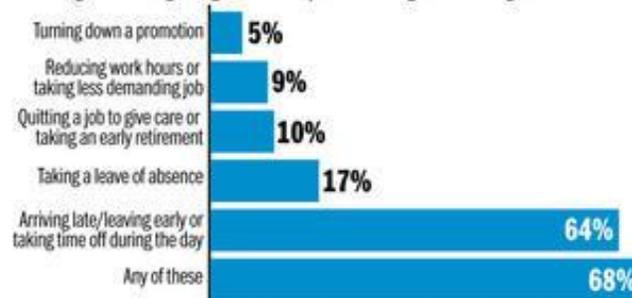
Lynette Whiteman never gets a break.

The 57-year-old spends her days helping her elderly neighbors continue to live in dignity in their own homes. In the evening, she takes care of her own 87-year-old mother Mildred, who lives with Whiteman and her husband.

The daily stresses of caregiving can add up for Whiteman, the executive director of Caregiver Volunteers of Central Jersey. If she gets delayed at work or even stops for gas on her commute, her dependent and highly anxious mother will call her cellphone panicked about when she’s coming home. Whiteman often has to decline professional and social events because of her mom’s needs.

Work accommodations due to caregiving

Percentage of working caregivers who reported making the following accommodations



SOURCE: National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP, Caregiving in the U.S. 2009.

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“I’m glad I’m able to do this for my mother — it’s nice to get back to intergenerational living and taking care of our elders — but it’s not easy,” she said. “You’re never really prepared for the switch from being a child to being a parent, and it’s very difficult.”

Whiteman said she finds refuge in friends, many of whom have gone through or are experiencing the same thing. She is not alone in her struggles.

Much of the media attention on work-life balance has focused on how to juggle a career and raise children, but similar personal and professional sacrifices can be required of those who support aging family members who can’t care for themselves.

According to a [2009 study from AARP and the National Alliance for Caregiving](#), at least 43.5 million Americans are already providing care for someone 50 years and older, and that number is only going to increase as the population ages. As many of those Americans are finding out, the impact that can have on a career is enormous, especially for women, who are more likely to be caregivers. A [2010 MetLife study](#) found that leaving the workforce early or reducing hours to care for an elderly relative costs the average woman caregiver \$324,044 in lost wages and Social Security benefits.

“Caregiving is so physically and emotionally demanding, and some people have to cut back hours or retire early to take care of an elderly relative,” said Laura Polacheck of AARP of Utah. “Caregiving is a full-time job, and if you already have full-time job, you’re left with no time at all.”

Aging America

America is getting older. The [Administration on Aging](#) projects that while those 65 and older numbered 39.6 million in 2009 — or 12.9 percent of the U.S. population — that number is due to nearly double to 72.1 million by 2030, when the 65 and over crowd will make up 19 percent of the population. And [government data](#) show older Americans are living longer. In 2000, a 65-year-old could expect to live to age 83, while in 1900 it was only age 77.

Maybe it was easier when both members of a married couple didn't have careers, Whiteman sometimes thinks, as she adjusts her schedule to take her mom to the doctor, or picks up her cellphone to give reassuring words that she will be home from work soon. She cares deeply about her work, and her husband has a successful career as a geriatric neurologist. But after working with the elderly all day, both come home exhausted and struggle to maintain the energy to deal with her mother's needs. "It's not for the faint of heart," Whiteman said.

Coupled with the aging population is the increase in the number of women working outside the home. The [Department of Labor reported](#) that between 1996 and 2006, the number of dual-income families increased by 31 percent. According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), in 2012, the share of married couples with children in which both parents worked was 59 percent.

The “average” caregiver is a 49-year-old woman who works outside the home, and 74 percent of caregivers have worked at a paying job, according to a [2012 AARP report](#). With the rise of dual-income families, the issue of who is going to care for mom and dad when they need assistance with daily tasks is increasingly a question where two careers hang in the balance.

Cali Williams Yost, a workplace flexibility strategist and author of "Tweak It: Make What Matters to You Happen Every Day," said that the work-life challenges of caregiving impact everyone in a family. “We think it’s mostly women, but there are a lot of male caregivers,” she

said. "I think one of the challenges is men feel left out. If women are unprepared, men feel really unprepared. Adult caregiving is going to become an everybody issue."

Double-decker club sandwich

For many Americans in their 40s to 60s, providing support has already become a constant in their lives. Members of this "sandwich generation" are trying to balance their own financial needs while getting squeezed from both sides as they help their kids and their parents. A recent report from Merrill Lynch and Age Wave, a research center on aging, found that six in 10 Americans past the age of 50 provide financial support to family members, with 68 percent supporting adult children and 16 percent supporting parents.

Those caregivers are often in their 50s and 60s, said Maddy Dychtwald, co-founder of Age Wave, and are often caregiving while helping their adult children financially and trying to save or start their own retirements. "It's a generational generosity," she said. "Forget the sandwich generation — this is more like the double-decker club generation."

And that strain can take its toll on the emotional, social and mental health of caregivers, which in turn can impact their professional lives. According to the MetLife report, caregivers aged 18 to 39 showed significantly higher rates of high cholesterol, hypertension, depression and heart disease in comparison to non-caregivers of the same age. Caregivers of all ages showed increases in poor health and higher levels of absenteeism from work than their counterparts.

Caregivers also show increased levels of stress — especially women. Whiteman said the increased emotional toll of caregiving has impacted her marriage and social life. Every time she thinks about going to a movie or dinner, she has to weigh the "huge emotional costs" of dealing with her mother's anxiety.

Whiteman added, though, that in many ways she's lucky. Her workplace is dedicated to helping caregivers, and so they are sympathetic to her need for flexibility.

But experts say most workplaces haven't adjusted to the needs of the growing elderly population. And taking time away from work can be detrimental to your own career and financial security, Dychtwald said. "The corporate response has been very slow," she said. "And so people are finding they may have to take time off or turn down a promotion, and at that point in your career, it's a whammy. The professional and financial ramifications are extraordinary."

Preparing for the changes

Whiteman learned her father had died in November 2011. She was devastated, her heart badly shaken. But her mother, who didn't even know how to use a checkbook without her husband's help, was lost in the world. In spite of warnings from friends, Whiteman took her mother in, no questions asked.

"I think at the time, it sounds like it's a good idea, but you don't realize how hard it's going to be," she said. "I like my alone time, and I never get to be by myself. I hate to cook, and now I have to cook every day for her. ... I'm not sure I would have changed my mind about having her come live with us, but there's all this stuff I never thought about that I wish I would have considered."

People like Whiteman often don't realize how much work caregiving is until it's too late, said Paul DelPonte, director of programs, operations and development at the National Alliance for Caregiving.

"One thing that is ever present is that people don't realize all they're doing in terms of caregiving until they are deeply into it," he said. "They just think of themselves as daughters caring for their family and don't recognize how much they are doing to balance the new demands caregiving has on their lives."

A lack of preparation for these overwhelming demands is one of the main reasons people give up on their careers, quitting their job and missing out on professional and financial opportunities, said Yost. Experts agree that talking about caregiving arrangements in advance is the single most important way to prevent becoming overwhelmed by caregiving responsibilities, even when those conversations are hard to have.

If caregiving is going to be part of someone's life, the conversation needs to happen with not just parents and siblings, but also employers about the new needs and demands is crucial to maintaining health and financial stability, Yost said. "It all begins with communication," she said.

Jacqueline Marcell, who wrote a book on elder care, "Elder Rage," after dealing with the impact taking care of parents with Alzheimer's had on her own career as a television executive, emphasized that, "There's no magical way to handle it on your own. You must get help."

Marcell said people don't realize all the small tasks they do, and recommended making a list of tasks — from sitting with parents to getting groceries — that people who ask how they can help can do for you.

There's no safety net for caregivers, added Yost, and so it's up to individuals to help themselves and work for change. She analogized the current state of the issue to the 1980s when women were afraid to talk to employers about child care, which eventually became a big enough social issue that companies adopted new policies in order to retain their talent.

"We're the pioneers of a long-lived society," Yost added. "It's a great time for us to all stand up and say, 'Yes this is an issue, it affects all of us and we need to do something about it.' And it starts with conversations."

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