

The Sandwich Generation

By Vivien Bergl, LCSW, CEAP

Solutions Employee Assistance Program Coordinator



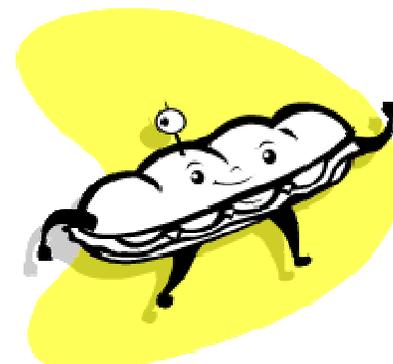
One evening, Mark (not his real name) called out to his wife Mary (not her real name) that wheat bread was on the phone. After Mary took the call and finished it (proclaiming a bad headache when she hung up), the phone rang again. Mary answered it and called to Mark that white bread was on the phone. In between calls, they were trying to figure out carpooling for their son to get to his games and helping their daughter with college applications, and Mark was doing a little work at home. What were they talking about?! Wheat bread, white bread, what's that about?

Mark and Mary are part of a group called the sandwich generation. This refers to the baby boomer children, now between the ages of 50 to mid 60's, or even to younger adults in their 30's and 40's. This group is sandwiched between the needs of multiple generations, while managing their day to day responsibilities. It can be a recipe (excuse the pun) for disaster. But before you despair we will be using this month to talk about how to handle the stress, what are some of the discussions you need to have with your children and parents and what resources are available for you and your loved ones.

Mary and Mark refer to her mother as "wheat bread" and they refer to his mother as "white bread" as cute code words. Though maybe this sounds unkind, it's actually one way of coping, Humor! They love their parents and do a great deal for them, but need to let off some steam. There are all sorts of connotations connected with this terminology sandwich generation. For example, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich describes those caregivers that are stuck between aging parents and children. A triple-decker sandwich identifies those that are caring for children, parents and grandparents.

Where do you fall or do you have friends and family struggling with this? Next, we will talk about who is in this population and some of the coping strategies to start with.

Judging by the many responses to The Sandwich Generation, Part 1, there are many of you out there in this population. And judging from some of the comments such as one person saying she feels like pita bread – FLAT OUT, another felt she was a Oreo cookie, perfectly placed outside layers cushioned by a creamy center, suddenly twisted apart in opposite directions with the center scraped out by sharp, pointy teeth, people in the sandwich generation do not find it easy.



Many statistics abound, but all of them point to the fact that the sandwich generation is THE largest segment of our population. According to the US Bureau of the Census, the number of parents living with their adult children increased from 2.2 million in 2000 to 3.6 million in 2007 – a 63% increase! These same adult children often have their children living with them, some of them well into their 20s. Other studies show that women (75%) are much more likely to be the care provider than men (25%) However other studies show that is shifting with more men becoming care givers due to the high rate of divorce and family being geographically scattered.

What helps all these people? First of all, acknowledge and accept the fact that everyone's emotions will be on a roller coaster. As soon as a sandwich generationer thinks things have calmed down, a plunge is inevitable. Either a child is having an issue in school or a parent is having a medical issue, its part of the territory.

Recognize, **you can not be all things to all people!** Learn to delegate and accept practical help and emotional support. It's crucial to your well being and that of your parent(s) and child(ren). Seek out resources at work and in the community – we will be talking about that in a later etip. A key sandwich generation responsibility is to enable and empower a parent to live as independently as possible as long as possible given true physical and mental capabilities. Another key responsibility is to practice self care! If you do not take care of yourself, you will not be able to care for anyone else. Unfortunately people develop health problems from the stress of elder care and child care if they do not practice self care.

Remember the positives of being a member of the sandwich generation. Our children might learn some family history from their grandparents, not to mention some valuable life insights! In turn, our parents may no longer feel isolated or abandoned. Sometimes it is an opportunity to resolve some past issues with our parents. And in some cases it can help financially when resources are pooled.

Now, we will talk about some of the ways you can be proactive by asking some key questions and having some important conversations with your parents, your children, community resources and your employer.



We continue to hear all kinds of analogies in regards to the sandwich generation. One man described himself as a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. This describes someone who feels stuck between aging parents and children. How do we help ourselves feel less trapped?

One of the ways is to be proactive. Try, if possible, to address legal, financial and quality of life issues before a crisis. There are multiple tasks to do and due to space constraints, we will address only the following ones:

Communicate with your parents when they are most able to participate fully and rationally. When you can, do it over a period of time rather than bombarding them.

Living situation:

Ask your parents what they envision as they age, where they want to live, what is realistic? This will involve discussions about whether they stay where they are, live with a family member or in some kind of assisted living. What are you comfortable with? If you decide you want a parent(s) to live with you, what do the rest of your family think?

Financial: If appropriate, find out what your parent(s) financial situation is. Will they have the financial means to cover living costs and health and other kind of care?

Talk to your children after you have talked to your parent(s) and significant other or spouse if you have one. Have an age appropriate conversation to tell them you anticipate caring for their grandparent(s). Explain what this may mean for them emotionally and practically speaking. Tell them they how they may be needed to assist. Try to enlist their questions or concerns as they arise.

Legal: Prepare by talking to your parent(s), significant other or spouse (if you have one), and siblings (if you have them). Decide who will have the authority needed to make decisions affecting the health care for your parents and for paying all household bills and care expenses. This is called durable power of attorney and/or medical power of attorney (it is called different things in different states). Have your parents fill out a Living Will. Check whether they have a living trust and a will. How (and to whom) would they want their estate to ultimately be divided?

You can consult with an elder care lawyer for more information on these options. Make sure you have the papers in secure, fireproof place.

Work: At the appropriate time, advise your workplace what is going on so if your work is affected, they will know why. If you anticipate a more significant impact, consult with your supervisor to discuss potential options. Are you able to do flextime, telecommuting or do you need to take some Family and Medical Leave (FMLA) time? Remember you can call Solutions Employee Assistance Program to discuss this.

The Key is to have resources. When possible, line up those resources ahead of time. When not possible, avail yourself of resources as soon as you can. Next we will talk about some of those resources available to you and your family.



As mentioned in the prior weeks, it is crucial to have resources when you are part of the sandwich generation. The good news – since the elderly population is the fastest growing segment of the state’s population – there are many resources available. You are not alone. There are several different forums on the internet where you can talk with others in your same situation.

Help is out there!

The five **Area Agencies on Aging** (AAAs) in Connecticut are private, not-for-profit corporations established in Ct. in 1974 to provide leadership and resources to meet the needs of the rapidly growing elderly population. The AAA, among other things, provide direct services in the area of community education, advocacy, case management, information and assistance, benefits counseling and training.

They also administer the **CHOICES Program** which provides older adults with health insurance counseling, information and referral to senior services and eligibility screening for state and federal benefit programs.

The Connecticut Department of Social Services, Aging Services Division offers many services, too numerous to mention here, but some important ones are housing assistance, cash assistance and energy assistance. Protective services will assist you if you feel an elderly person is unable to care for him or herself.

Info-Line 211 is a referral service that will connect you and your family to appropriate services.

Your town often has programs for the elderly; just contact the town in which you live in. If your family member has a certain illness, Alzheimers, for instance, contact the Alzheimers Association or association connected with the illness your family member suffers from. Ask people you know, According to the Pew Research Organization there are approximately 10 million Americans in the exact situation you are in at this very moment.

There are often support groups for family members who are providing elder care. Nursing homes, assisted living facilities and other groups run them.

And remember Solutions Employee Assistance Program is available for you and your family for this or any other issue you may be struggling with.

**Call Solutions EAP at 1-800-526-3485 for assistance for all of life's challenges.
It's free, confidential and open to your family members.
Check us out on-line at
<http://www.solutions-eap.com>**