

More and more of us are doing it. Research shows that 32 per cent of Canadian workers are caring for elderly family members, and the majority of caregivers take time off work to do so. In fact, 15 per cent of sandwiched workers had to reduce their hours to look after a loved one.

Balancing work & care

By Audrey Miller, MSW, RSW, CCRC

One in four working Canadians experiences high levels of caregiver strain. Four types of caregiver stress have been defined: emotional (e.g., anxiety, emotional exhaustion), physical, financial, and family strain.

So what can a working caregiver do? While each situation is different, there are some common steps you can take. First, be realistic about the recipient's care requirements and, equally important, be realistic about how much help you can provide. Will the caregiving be a short-term activity while mom or dad is recovering or will it be a long-term commitment?

Second, consider the following questions to determine what you can do to make your home or work life easier:

What would make your home load easier?

- ❑ Can other family members share the caregiving responsibilities?
- ❑ Can other family members assist with household responsibilities?
- ❑ Can you afford to hire a paid caregiver?
- ❑ Have you contacted your local government care agency to discuss respite care?
- ❑ Are there adult day programs in your neighbourhood that can accommodate your parent?
- ❑ Have you had a family meeting to discuss concerns and brainstorm solutions of where help can be provided and who can provide what and when?
- ❑ Have you considered your parent's present and future needs?
- ❑ Have you spoken to the care recipient to learn what they want?
- ❑ Has he or she seen a specialist? Can you obtain more information on their condition to anticipate future care needs (e.g., issues of mobility, climbing stairs, cognitive decline, and so on)?

What would make your work life easier?

- ❑ Have you spoken to a supervisor to share your concerns? Remember, everyone has a parent and we all get older.
- ❑ Have you chatted with your human resource department? An employee assistance program may be available to help you locate resources and provide confidential counselling.
- ❑ Are flexible hours an option?
- ❑ Is reducing your hours possible?
- ❑ Is taking a leave of absence an option?
- ❑ Is job sharing possible?
- ❑ Is working from home an option?
- ❑ Are you able to reduce travel time or say no to overtime hours?
- ❑ Is quitting your job the answer? Make sure you understand your financial reserves and the costs involved.

To help you determine your needs, sit down with a counsellor or another professional who can objectively outline your options. If you need help assessing your loved one's current and future needs, speak with their medical specialist, family doctor or a geriatric care manager who can assist you in exploring resources and alternatives.

No decision is final

When balancing work and care, remember that no decision is final. The choice lies with you. Finding a balance is not easy. Try to set aside some time for yourself, and keep it as a repeating occurrence in your calendar. Also, consider joining a support group. Above all, remember that your health is paramount. After all, if you don't take care of yourself, you might require your own caregiver! ●

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“‘Silent’ and ‘listen’ are spelt with the same letters.”

Anonymous



Need a break?

Taking an occasional break can help you balance your life's responsibilities. Try these time-out tips:

- Hire a private caregiver for a few hours.
- Go for a walk in the park.
- Treat yourself to a massage.
- Hit the gym to blow off steam.
- Have lunch with a friend.
- Do something you enjoy, if only for a few minutes a day.