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Sandwich Generation

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What Is the Sandwich Generation?

The “sandwich generation” refers to a person in middle adulthood who has simultaneous commitments to help their children adjust to adulthood and help their elderly parents as they deal with issues of later life (Raphael & Schlesinger, 1993).

Taking care of one’s own adult children and elderly parents at the same time has important implications for individuals, couple relationships, and the entire family. Most individuals in this stage of life are 45 to 65 years of age (Raphael & Schlesinger, 1993). The term “sandwich generation” may refer to two or three generations actually living in the same household or it can refer to having commitments and responsibilities to both the older and younger generation while they live in their own homes.

Is the “Sandwich Generation” a New Concept?

The “sandwich generation” was coined in the 1980s as a result of adults living longer and adult children leaving home later and being more likely to return (Miller, 1981). This was recognized as a stressful time in the lives of those in “the sandwich.”

In the early nineteenth century the average life expectancy for adults in the United States was 40.9 years of age. Today, less than 100 years later, people are living to an average age of 75 years. Thus, caring for elderly parents over a longer period of time is likely to occur (Roots, 1998). Although

the elderly are more likely to live longer and live alone than ever before, they may need the emotional and financial support from their sandwiched children in order to maintain their independent lifestyle (Bianchi & Casper, 2000).

Adult children are also “launching” later than ever before and are more likely to return home, needing support from their sandwiched parents for longer periods of time (Cohen & Casper, 2002). They may return home while attending college, during job transitions, when money becomes tight, or if a relationship or marriage breaks up (Bianchi & Casper, 2000). Today’s sandwich generation parents are more likely to take in their adult children and view this support as contributing to a successful transition to adulthood than ever before (Bianchi & Casper).

Women and the Sandwich Generation

Care for elderly parents is more likely to be provided by women (75%) than men (25%) (Bianchi & Casper, 2000). Between half and two-thirds of adult women will care for elderly parents or in-laws at some time in their lives (Family Caregiver Online, n.d.). The majority of the stress for those in the sandwich generation, therefore, is likely to fall on women.

Issues with Elderly Parents

As these new responsibilities for elderly parents occur, several issues might arise that must be addressed by those in the sandwich generation:

- There may be financial responsibilities that the elderly parents cannot cover (Family Caregivers Online, n.d.).
- There may be a need to manage legal, financial, and emotional issues of elderly parents (Family Caregivers Online).
- Siblings may or may not contribute to the care of the elderly parents (Family Caregivers Online).
- The elderly parent's future needs may be unclear (Clark & Weber, n.d.).
- The quality of the relationship that the sandwich generation parents had with their aging parents can affect feelings about providing care (Ward & Spitze, 1998; Zal, 1992).
- There may be pain and guilt about current or potential nursing home placement (Zal).

Issues with Adult Children

At the same time issues are occurring with elderly parents, other issues may arise with adult children such as:

- The degree of financial support parents provide to the adult child (e.g. educational expenses, car insurance expenses, use of the family car, and food) affect the financial burden felt by those in the sandwich generation (Miller, 1981).
- The reason the adult child returned home affects feelings about providing resources for the adult child (Ward & Spitze, 1998). Reasons for adult children returning home include an unplanned pregnancy, divorce, losing a job, attending college, etc.
- The quality of the parent/child relationship affects all family relationships (Ward & Spitze).
- The role the adult child plays in terms of helping with household chores affects the workload experienced by those in the sandwich generation (Raphael & Schlesinger, 1993).

Thinking about One's Marriage

This is a time when sandwiched couples may be looking forward to privacy and freedom from responsibility (Raphael & Schlesinger, 1993). They are ready for self-indulgence (Miller, 1981).

They are ready to re-establish the spark in their relationship. Caring for elderly parents and adult children may interfere with what they thought could be the best time in their married life.

There is evidence that having a healthy marriage going into the sandwich generation phase of life is a great benefit to spouses in dealing with the stresses of caring for two other generations (Loomis & Booth, 1995; Ward & Spitze, 1998). It is important, therefore, to keep the marriage relationship strong through the years of raising children, in preparation for what may be a more stressful time later in life.

It Is Not Always Negative

Members of the sandwich generation may experience stress with the many obligations that go with caring for elderly parents and adult children. Others, however, see the increased opportunity to spend time with adult children and/or elderly parents as gratifying. Research studies are mixed about whether being in the "sandwich" is a negative experience or a positive experience (Raphael & Schlesinger, 1993; Ward & Spitze, 1998). What the elderly parents and the adult children bring to the situation may make a difference in determining if this is a positive experience for those in the sandwich generation.

Recommendations for Those in the Sandwich Generation

- Take care of yourself. Find time for things you enjoy. Do not neglect the quality of your own life because you are taking care of others (Zal, 1992).
- Take care of your marriage. If you have a spouse or partner, do not neglect that relationship (Raphael & Schlesinger, 1993).
- Utilize support systems in your community to aid in the care of elderly parents and/or adult children to reduce your stress (Zal).
- Seek emotional support from friends, family, or other organizations (Family Services, Employee Assistance Programs, n.d.)

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