

Growing Demand for Sandwich Generation to Step Up to Elder Care Role

Suggestions on making assessments, care plans and how to consider different options for aging in place

By Suzanne F. McNeely, MSW, RG, CCF, President of Senior Planning Services

March 2, 2009 - With the struggles of today's economy and the life expectancy of the population increasing, there are huge demands surfacing for caregivers of the elderly. A popular term and the primary demographic for senior caregiving is the "Sandwich Generation", the adult children of seniors.

The Sandwich Generation has been tasked with caring for their nuclear families as well as taking responsibility for their aging parents. Most feel stretched thin at best and are often left wondering how they can help alleviate the growing burden of caring for their parents.

As an alternative to nursing homes or long term care facilities, many families are opting to keep aging loved ones in the home. While the senior in your life might love the idea of staying in the home, as a close family member, caregiver or friend there are many considerations and worries that go along with this decision.

The Sandwich Generation needs some relief from the stress of worrying about how to handle caregiving and what they can do to prepare. The following will allow you to create a working guide to making assessments, care plans and how to consider different options for aging in place.

The First Step: Assessment

The first step when considering caregiving in the home is to conduct your own assessment in a quiet and unobtrusive manner.

1. Ask without being patronizing. You're likely to notice a general slowdown of activity and faculties - a cue to ask general questions. If you see specific things that worry you, talk them over. Explain your concern. Listen! Propose solutions - if needed. Better yet, ask your loved one what he or she thinks the solution might be.

2. Observe carefully. If you notice that clothes are not as clean as they used to be, you might ask, "Mom, can I help with the laundry? I'm usually here on the weekends. How about I throw in a couple of loads for you?"

3. Open the lines of communication. The biggest fear of the aging is losing their independence. If you notice your Dad's refrigerator is often empty, your instinct might be to tell him you'll be doing the shopping from now on. He may, reasonably, see that as an intrusion. Instead, talk with him. Try to determine why the fridge is empty. There are dozens of possible reasons. Perhaps he has little appetite. Maybe he is uncomfortable driving to the store because he needs new glasses.

4. Pay attention. Your loved one might tell you about a problem or concern. Although it's not always the case, some older individuals are comfortable telling their family when they need help. You may feel you know just how to help if you're Dad asks, "These eyes aren't what they used to be. Would you look over my checkbook and bills before I mail them?" Perhaps helping with the bills and scheduling an eye exam is appropriate. Possibly, however, your Dad is not concerned about his vision; maybe he is worried that his mental alertness is deteriorating. Listening sometimes means reading between the lines.

5. Poll others. As you focus on the issues, it is a good idea to speak with other family members and friends about your concerns. They may be a good source of insight, especially if they see your aging loved one regularly.

When you have a concern, it may be tempting to rush to intercede. It's better, however, to avoid taking over. Try and come up with a plan together, that way your loved one will feel like they have a say in their care plan. If you come across some issues that just don't seem like they are safe to handle on your own, consider involving the professional community - a primary care physician, a gerontologist, or home care specialist.

Step 2: Develop a Care Plan

The end goal of a care plan is to age SUCCESSFULLY in the home, meaning there needs to be a plan to address the individual needs of the aging family member. As the loved one's caregiver, it is important to sit down with them to create a care plan that will contribute to successful aging in place. Whether you are going to enlist a professional caregiver or attempt to implement the plan yourself, the following are steps you can take and adapt to your loved one's specific care needs:

- List the needs for support and additional care that you and others have observed. These will generally fall into the following areas:

- > **Housekeeping** - laundry, shopping, and household paperwork. Observe what seems to be slipping around the house and move this to the top of the list.

- > **Social and safety needs** - transportation services, companionship, and daily telephone checks. Ask your loved one what makes them the most happy socially. Make sure these things happen each week.

> **Nutrition** - meal planning, cooking, and meal delivery. Have your loved one make a list of their favorite meals. Involving them in the process will make them more receptive to help.

> **Health care** - nursing, social work, physical and rehabilitative therapy, and medication monitoring. If there are pre-existing conditions have help come in, or make it as simple as taking a stroll around the neighborhood each day.

> **Personal care** - assistance with personal hygiene, medical equipment, dressing, bathing, and exercise. If your mother seems to have trouble with buttons, replace clothes with zippered items. It really can be that simple.

- Decide and plan for who can devote the necessary time/attention to provide support. To relieve some stress, try and spread out the responsibilities. Typically a relative, friend, spouse, professional caregiver or some combination of all.

- Make a list of specific help needed in the way of tasks. This will go a long way in taking out the overwhelming feeling from caregiving. Try to plan out a schedule so the tasks are fairly evenly distributed over the week. For instance, laundry on Monday, grocery shopping on Tuesday, house cleaning on Wednesday, etc.

- Get specific commitments (e.g., Aunt Mary will do the grocery shopping every Saturday). These commitments need to include, as appropriate, a statement of who, what, when, where, and how. Remember to ask for help to alleviate the entire care burden.

One of the most important decisions associated with developing a care plan is considering whether you and/or family members will be able to handle the responsibility.

In some cases, you may want to consider seeking other forms of support; nutrition or preventive health services and caregiver support services.

Keep in mind that many outside services are funded in part through the Older Americans Act and administered by the U.S. Administration on Aging. For more information about local services, contact the Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116 or at www.eldercare.gov.

About the Author: Suzanne McNeely, MSW, RG, CCF, is president and founder of Senior Planning Services (SPS) in Santa Barbara, CA. (www.seniorplanningservices.com) She began SPS in 1989 after many years of working in social services and hospital administration. Suzanne designed SPS to help advocate and provide guidance in all aspects of daily life for the elderly, including psychological, physical, financial and legal issues. She can be reached at smcneely@seniorplanningservices.com.

Published at: <http://www.seniorjournal.com/NEWS/Eldercare/2009/20090302-GrowingDemand.htm>