

Strategies for Reducing Stress when Career and Caregiving Clash

By Jennifer FitzPatrick

According to the Family Caregiver Alliance, nearly 17% of the workforce are also caregiving for a loved one who has a disability, injury or illness – and this number is expected to continue growing. Employee assistance professionals are all too familiar with this issue because it's one that so many of their clients face. But what actually happens when a worker is personally struggling to juggle both the demands of caregiving for a loved one and a full-time job?

Caregivers with careers often report feeling that the merging of personal and professional responsibilities is so daunting that they consider leaving the workplace altogether. But if the goal is to provide excellent care to a loved one without dropping to part-time status, quitting, or prematurely retiring, the EAP should consider sharing the following strategies outlined in this article.

❖ **Acknowledge that it is normal to question whether or not you “should” be working as a caregiver, especially if you are a woman.** For most of history, females stayed home with the kids and then took care of the sick and older loved ones in the family. But both genders who are working caregivers tend to second-guess whether or not they should retire early, reduce hours to work part time or even leave the workforce entirely. While it's normal to have such thoughts, know that you can continue as a working caregiver if you surround yourself with enough support.

❖ **Form a caregiving crew.** At work, we recognize that we need support to do a great job and not be spread too thin. We rely on our man-

ager, colleagues as well as vendors and contractors to support us when handling challenging projects. *We must adopt this same mindset when caring for a loved one.* Best practices in caregiving means there is a primary caregiver, at least one or two secondary caregivers, and many tertiary caregivers. The following is a definition of each:

➤ A primary caregiver is the main person coordinating, planning, and/or providing care for the person who is ill. In other words, the primary caregiver is the person in charge, the organizer, who also often does the bulk of the caregiving tasks. To use a boating analogy, consider the primary caregiver as the captain of a ship.

➤ A secondary caregiver is a person invested in the older loved one's care but who is not able or willing to be on the front lines as often or as closely. If we consider the primary caregiver the captain of the ship, the secondary caregiver is the first mate. The secondary caregiver may perform some of the direct caregiving duties to help the individual, but additionally, they may perform tasks to support the primary caregiver.

➤ Tertiary caregivers provide support to and take stress off the primary caregiver. A tertiary caregiver is similar to the dockhand at the marina. Any captain will tell you that docking can be stressful, even under decent weather conditions. Even with the help of a first mate, docking can go awry because of unpredictable winds, mechanical malfunctions, or the angle of the vessel next to your slip.

But when there is a dockhand at the marina, it is much easier to dock the boat. Typically the

tertiary caregiver does not have much direct contact or impact on the ill loved one. But the tertiary caregiver can still have a significant impact on the primary and/or secondary caregivers.

For example, if you are the primary caregiver for your husband who is recovering from an injury, perhaps your sister can serve as the secondary caregiver. Maybe she can pick up his prescriptions when you have to take your kids to soccer practice. Maybe your neighbors would be willing to serve as tertiary caregivers by doing your grocery shopping while they do their own.

Don't forget that friends and neighbors of the loved one you are caring for can also provide secondary or tertiary caregiver support. If you have to travel to visit your older mother when she is in the hospital, perhaps your mother's friends in her community can pick you up at the airport.

❖ **Make sure your boss and team know that you are caregiving.** While you don't need to share every painstaking detail with your boss, it is important that he/she knows you are a caregiver and understands a little about what that involves. Often, working caregivers are reluctant to share these details, much the way some working mothers are reluctant to discuss childcare issues because they don't want their boss to doubt their commitment to the job.

In reality, however, many employers are willing to make special arrangements to retain you based on your individual needs — especially if you are a top performer at your job. As an employee assistance professional, you have likely given this advice to your clients but, if applicable to your own situation, it's important for you to follow it yourself!

❖ **Think about taking advantage of the FMLA.** How should the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) be best utilized for a given situation? When would be a good time? Should it be taken all at once or in shorter increments? The employee caregiver should talk to his/her caregiving crew about FMLA options in order to

plan a coordinated effort to offer the best possible caregiving for an older loved one.

❖ **Limit activities not absolutely essential to work, which will provide not only good care for your loved one, but also in taking care of yourself.** Employee caregivers should let go of everything they can that doesn't absolutely *have* to be done or doesn't bring pleasure. For instance, stop volunteering for every committee at your child's school. Decline social functions that you don't have a burning desire to attend.

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Also, set clear boundaries with colleagues regarding your ability to take on extra projects and work additional hours. One great way to implement this strategy is by starting today: cancel one thing on your personal or work schedule this week that isn't absolutely essential.

❖ **Create a plan B.** Emergencies come up both at the office and in caregiving. Figure out who your backup is for picking up the kids, taking Mom to her doctor's appointments, or attending that unplanned but mandatory business meeting. These back-up persons could be a combination of your caregiving crew like family, friends, and neighbors but also can include paid helpers.

❖ **Set clear boundaries for yourself and with others.** We are living and working during



a time when work bleeds into our personal lives and vice versa. Create better boundaries during off-duty work hours, but also set limits with the loved one you are caring for. If your mother who is ill is constantly calling you at work because she is bored, set limits with her. Tell Mom she can't call you unless there is a true emergency. Or call Mom each day on your lunch break for five minutes to check in.

Initially when you set such boundaries at work or home, there will likely be push-back. If for years you have responded to work emails late into the night at home, your colleagues, managers, and clients may be surprised when they don't hear back from you immediately. Mom might give you the cold shoulder when you let her know that you won't be available all day every day via phone. It will likely be hard at first. But when you consistently uphold these boundaries, it will help you be more efficient when focused on work *or* caregiving.

❖ **Take planned breaks away from caregiving and work.** Maybe you don't want to take a two-week trip to Europe right now – but figure out a way to get *some* time off. Many employee caregivers report that all of their personal time off is allocated toward taking care of their loved ones. Figure out a way how to integrate *some kind* of break into your life. Will you commit to a weekly yoga class? Can you meet a friend for lunch on a monthly basis? Will you devote at least 15 minutes to yourself each day so you can take a bath or read a magazine?

Think of a time before caregiving when you took a vacation. Didn't you come back to work with new ideas and a refreshed outlook? When functioning as a working caregiver, you need breaks more than ever so you can enjoy a new perspective, even if the break is short.

❖ **Delegate lesser tasks either at work or in your personal life.** In your personal life, delegate a given job – you determine what – to one of your kids, spouse, friend or another family member. What in your life right now doesn't absolutely require your personal attention? Can

your brother take your mother to the elder law attorney? At work, what projects or assignments don't require your involvement or oversight specifically? Is it time to ask a colleague or a manager to take one of your most time-consuming clients, at least temporarily?

❖ **Embrace community organizations.** If you aren't already utilizing outside help from professional organizations, know that you will eventually need to do just that. Look at your options early and often. Become familiar with services such as your local Area Agency on Aging (AAA) as well as the non-profits that could provide support for your loved one's specific circumstances. For instance: Alzheimer's Association, American Cancer Society, and National Alliance on Mental Illness, National Multiple Sclerosis Society, and the American Heart Association.

These groups frequently offer support groups, conferences, telephone, and online support to caregivers. It can also be helpful to research options for nursing homes, assisted living communities, home care agencies, and hospice organizations in case you need them at some point.

Summary

As an employee assistance professional, you have likely supported countless clients facing circumstances like these. However, don't forget that if *you* are also coping with an elderly parent or other loved one, always strive to treat yourself with the same empathy and compassion that you would offer a struggling client. ■

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Determining if Your Loved One Needs Help



We all know that all too often, we are the last ones to look in a mirror and admit, “*Yeah, that’s me.*” Along similar lines, after a lifetime of caring for themselves and raising a family, it can be very difficult for a loved one to admit that he/she can no longer adequately care for him/herself. While this handout should not be seen as a substitute for medical advice, it can go a long way toward determining if caregiving assistance is in order.

❖ **Physical health.** Has the elderly individual been diagnosed with any chronic illnesses such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or arthritis? What about other diseases, such as bowel or bladder problems, heart disease, stroke or cancer? Does he/she have vision or hearing problems, excessive weight loss or gain, or difficulty walking? Make a list of health care professionals currently used, and add any recent hospital stays.

❖ **Mental health.** Has the elderly person been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s or another form of dementia? Do you know what the early warning signs are?

❖ **Medication use.** What medications is the individual currently taking? What is the dosage? How often? Is he/she taking the medication as directed?

❖ **Daily living skills.** Is the elderly individual able to dress, bathe, get up from a chair, use a toilet, climb stairs, and use the phone? Does the elderly parent or other relatives know how to get help in case of an emergency? Can he/she shop, prepare meals, do housework, and drive safely?

❖ **Home and community safety.** How safe is the neighborhood where the elderly person lives? Does the elderly individual’s home have smoke alarms, and can they be heard adequately? Is your loved one able to avoid phone and door-to-door fraud? What about maintaining the house?

❖ **Support systems.** Does the elderly individual have visitors or see friends? Does he/she go to a Senior Center, or get out of the house for other social reasons? Do family members live close by? Do they know the names, addresses, and phone numbers of friends, family, and/or neighbors who can be called in an emergency?

❖ **Appearance and hygiene.** How is the elderly person’s overall appearance? Hair clean? Teeth brushed? Shaved?

❖ **Finances.** Does the elderly person’s income cover basic living expenses? Can future needs be met with current income? Are there any legal documents such as trusts, living wills, and/or durable power of attorney? Are bills paid on time?

Summary

An assessment like this can help solve problems and allow a parent or other elderly person to remain independent longer. It’s not always easy to recognize when an elder loved one needs help. Learning how to assess their needs will make it easier to know when, and how, to seek help. ■

Source: American Association of Retired Persons (www.aarp.org).