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CAREER COUCH

Easing the Stress of Daily Care-Giving

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN
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Q. You find yourself having to care for an ill family member while holding down a full-time job. How can you handle both of these demanding duties without feeling overwhelmed?



A. Caregivers often feel they have one choice: quit their jobs and become full-time caregivers or keep working but do an inadequate job of meeting the needs of their ailing family member, says Denise M. Brown, founder of Caregiving.com, an online resource and forum for family caregivers. Fortunately, she says, it's not nearly that cut and dried.

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As you look for solutions, don't be afraid to ask your employer for help. Ms. Brown suggests tapping into your company's employee assistance plan or looking into work/life benefits that the company may offer. Those often include the services of a geriatric care manager who can research and coordinate care in the community where you need it.

You might also talk to your human resources department about taking some weeks off through the [Family and Medical Leave Act](#). "Sometimes just taking two weeks off allows you to get a care plan in place and makes it much easier to get back to work," Ms. Brown says.

Q. Should you talk to your manager and colleagues about the situation?

A. "We encourage people to let their close colleagues and manager know about the situation," says Andy Cohen, C.E.O. of Caring.com, a Web site that provides information, forums and local resources for caregivers. More than 40 million Americans are caring for someone over age 50, so chances are someone else at your office is facing a similar situation, Mr. Cohen says.

Explain to your boss what's happening with your loved one and how you plan to deal with it. Before the meeting, assess your current workload and responsibilities and determine what steps need to be taken for you to meet your job requirements and ensure that co-workers and clients aren't negatively affected, says Faun Zarge, a work and life consultant based in Newton, Mass.

"Present a plan to your boss that outlines how you will manage your day-to-day responsibilities along with your care-giving responsibilities," she says. "Consider how tasks critical to your team and the organization will get done if you are out."

Keep one or two colleagues up-to-date on projects in which you're involved, so that if you have to leave unexpectedly someone can step in for you.

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Q. *It's likely that you'll have to take phone calls at work or leave midday for doctor appointments or emergencies. How should you handle this?*

A. Be honest with your manager about the amount and type of flexibility you will need, so you aren't trying to sneak around or cover up phone calls and absences. "That will actually allow you to maintain or improve your performance, because you won't be distracted and stressed by the care-giving tasks on your plate," says Ms. Zarge.

It's also crucial to check in with your manager regularly to make sure your flexible schedule and coverage arrangements are working. Send an e-mail every few weeks to your manager and those colleagues helping you, to thank them for their support and gauge how things are going.

"Ask them: 'Is there anything we need to adjust to make the plan work more smoothly?' You want to make sure that at any point, if things aren't working well, they know they should tell you," says Ms. Zarge.

Q. *Being a caregiver can be enormously stressful. What can you do about that?*

A. Exercise is a good way to reduce stress hormones and cause the release of endorphins, biochemicals that relieve pain and cause a feeling of well-being, according to Debbie Mandel, a stress management consultant and author of "Changing Habits: The Caregivers' Total Workout." It's also important to eat right, get enough sleep and keep up hobbies that make you happy.

Get some help by looking for volunteers at your house of worship or advertise for help from college or graduate students majoring in subjects like psychology, geriatric care or social work, Ms. Mandel says. They can visit and spend time with your loved one.

"These students need the internship experience," she says. "They can provide some stimulation to that family member and in return, they get a letter or recommendation from you for their work."

There are many support groups and forums for caregivers that provide advice and understanding, Mr. Cohen says. Contact your local Area Agency on Aging for resources close to you and use sites like Caring.com and AARP.org, for online support.

Try not to feel resentful about your situation. Don't ask "why me" because there is no answer, says Ms. Mandel, who cared for her parents — both of whom had Alzheimer's disease — while working full time.

"Everyone gets hit with problems in their lives. Let go of the past and thinking about what you once had and live in the present instead," she says.

Keep in mind that just remaining on the job can provide stress relief. Doing your job — and doing it well — gives you a break from all the care-giving, says Ms. Mandel, and "lets you tap into your larger identity."

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