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The Sandwich Generation: A Cluttered Nest

The needs of three generations and solutions to resolve their stresses are covered here.

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- Summary

Lisa and Bruce both have careers. They have a teen-age son, a college student daughter, a recently divorced daughter with a one-year-old child, and an elderly mother who needs an increasing amount of caregiving, all living in the same household. They are classic members of the **sandwich generation**.

In the 1990s, people live longer, they postpone marriage, more children are living at home to go to college, and an increasing number of adult children are returning home after a divorce or loss of job. Consequently, larger numbers of mid-life couples feel caught in the middle between the demands of their aging parents and those of their own children. These are couples and individuals between the ages of 45 and 65 who assumed their children would grow up, leave home, and live as independent, self-supporting adults.

Expectations of Middle Years

People in the middle years also expected their aging parents would remain independent, self-supporting and healthy into their late adult years. When their parents' health began to fail, those in their middle years thought there would be appropriate care centers where their parents could receive the necessary services and where children and grandchildren could visit. Retirement benefits, coupled with Medicaid and Medicare, would cover most of the expenses. At the same time, these middle-aged adults believed they could travel and do some special things in life that they had been postponing while their children were growing up.

Suddenly, things are not working out as expected. There are demands at work. Those at mid-life are at the peak of their careers. Demands are made by teen and adult children, and demands increasingly are

being made by frail parents.

Unfulfilled Dreams: Unrealized expectations can translate directly into disappointments, feelings of resentment, anxiety and stress. Many middle-years people, expecting to be free with the emptying of the nest, made plans for their preretirement and retirement years.

Lisa and Bruce were making plans to travel to Europe to explore their family roots and to meet with recently discovered relatives who migrated to the United States more than a century ago. Instead, their "empty nest" seems cluttered and bursting at the seams. Now they may have to change or postpone their plans to accommodate new responsibilities.

The uncertainty of not knowing how long they will have to wait for "their time," or even if they ever will get a chance to pursue some of these dreams, plus not knowing what is expected of them in regard to their parents and children, are sources of great stress. Such stress can pile up and temper their genuine commitment to help family members in time of crisis or need.

People of the sandwich generation also worry about the loss of their own independence, and their duty to their own children versus their duty to their parents. They worry about their family's financial and physical resources, spreading themselves too thinly across too many roles, and their own coping skills in the face of the complex situations that confront them.

These types of worries, concerns and pressures are felt by the middle generation, whether or not there is a multi-generational household.

The Sandwich Generation

Figure 1. These are the needs of the sandwich generation, their children and parents.

Caught in the middle between		
What our kids want and need	*What we want and need*	*What our parents want and need*
Independence	Help	Acceptance
Respect	Appreciation	Independence
Sounding board	Pressure off	Respect
Separate entity	"My turn"	Control
Patience	Independence	Sharing
Guideline	Listening ear	Involvement
Flexibility	Acceptance	Emotional support
Acceptance	Time with my own generation	Interpersonal relationships
Security	Solitude	Interaction
Money	Space	Inclusion
Support	Unconditional love	
Make choices		
Unconditional love		
Control of own life	Control of own life	Control of own life

Generational Needs

The sandwich generation is caught in the middle between: (1) what their children want and need; (2) what they want and need; and (3) what their parents want and need. The diagram above lists some of the needs for each generation.

1. Teens and adult children want independence despite their temporary state of dependence. They value their parents guidance and need their parents to be a sounding board as they start their own adult lives. They want to be accepted and respected, even if their ideas and lifestyle are different. They need some security and support, both verbal and often monetary, as they enter the adult years. Most of all, they need their parents' patience and unconditional love.

2. People caught in the sandwich generation need help! They need to have some of the pressure taken off--they need solitude, space, and appreciation from both generations. They need time with their peers, time to pursue the peak of their careers, and time to have "my turn" to do the things they want to do.

3. At the same time, the sandwich generations' parents want to be independent, even under increasingly difficult circumstances. They need interaction with their grandchildren and their peers. Facing a future of increasing losses and declining health, they need to be accepted, to have their childrens' involvement and emotional support, and to be included in family life.

The overriding need of each generation is to have a ***sense of control*** and a ***sense of purpose*** about their own life. Individuals who feel in control of life generally experience greater life satisfaction.

A perception of control influences how people proceed in life, approach a crisis, and make decisions. If there is an ***internal*** sense of control, there is a greater feeling of power over one's environment and decisions. If control seems ***external***, there is a feeling of little or no control over what happens, and there may be an unwillingness to make decisions. People who are externally controlled tend to experience more psychological distress and illness.

In Bruce and Lisa's situation, they may feel they have little choice. A lack of communication, infrequent demonstration of affection, and failure to work out differences can result in misunderstanding, frustration, resentment and alienation.

Developmental Tasks of Middle Years.

The middle years have been characterized as the "re-years." Words descriptive of this life phase begin with "re," a prefix meaning "to do again, to go back;" to reassess, reevaluate, rekindle, relearn, review, reappraise, restructure.

To do this, people need to pursue the developmental tasks of mid-life. Developmental tasks are the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed at different points in their lives.

1. **Launching children into responsible, happy adulthood.** There is a gradual lessening of control and dependency. The sandwich generation needs to be sympathetic and supportive, helping children in a businesslike way. Expect them to make some financial commitment and, if in college, a commitment to study and to make adequate progress toward graduation.

   If children are reentering the household, the launching task is more difficult.

2. **Revitalizing their marriage.** Because partners in the sandwich generation may have been busy raising a family, establishing a career and participating in community activities, they may have neglected one another. Sometimes the challenge of revitalizing and establishing closeness may be difficult. With adult children, or especially with a frail parent, time and energy may be focused on them, and not on the task of marital revitalization.

3. **Review satisfaction and success concerning occupation or career.** The middle years should be the most creative and productive period of an individual's work life. It also may be a time of unfulfilled expectations, a time when individuals begin to feel taken for granted. They may feel bored and disillusioned with their work. If a frail parent enters the household, someone's career, usually the woman's, may be put on hold.

4. **Reorienting oneself to aging parents.** Middle-aged adults often witness their surviving parents encountering a significant time of change. This can be a sad and upsetting experience as their parents endure multiple losses and become increasingly dependent.

5. **Realigning sex roles.** A realignment of masculine/feminine sex roles is common in the middle years. Husbands perform more services formerly provided by the wife (e.g. household chores) and wives assume some of the husband's responsibilities (e.g. managing finances).

   Carl Jung said there is a need to integrate the opposites--for the masculine to integrate the feminine, and vice versa. This is the time for men to be more caring and expressive and for women to exhibit more objectivity and assertiveness.

6. **Reappraising where they are in terms of where they wanted to be by this time.** It's a time to ask "Who am I?" and "Where do I go from here?" The past must be integrated with the future, and dreams reassessed in terms of one's life course. It may be necessary to modify earlier dreams, set new goals, and, perhaps, make some major changes.

   The commitment to address these developmental tasks signals one's entry into and participation in mid-life. If the challenges presented by these tasks are met, and the accompanying conflicts resolved, the middle years are likely to be a time of continued growth, personal satisfaction and happiness.

   If these tasks are not accomplished, the middle years may become a period of stagnation and increasing disillusionment. Successful adaptation to and meeting the challenge of the middle years can set the stage for growth and adaptation in later years.

Sandwich Generation Solutions

Can the challenges and complexities of **multi-generational living** be met? Listed below are several possible solutions for a meaningful and satisfying style of life:

1. **Clarify the house rules.** Include everything--eating schedules, cleanup responsibilities, space arrangements, laundry duties, transportation, and when the house is to be quiet in the evening. Review the rules from time to time to accommodate changing circumstances and to keep the lines of communication open. Expect all to abide by the middle-generation's values while they are under that roof.

2. **Have a weekly family meeting.** Insist that all be there to keep communication going and conflicts

to a minimum. When they do occur, settle them quickly and with good humor. Family meetings can prevent the denial of problems and can help to establish better attitudes toward one another, as well as tolerance for existing differences in values and styles of life. Necessary decisions can be made and adhered to. In families where healthy interaction is difficult, professional counseling/therapy is recommended.

3. **Prepare a long-range financial plan.** If you have college students, or adults returning home, or a frail parent, you will need to work out a detailed plan about who is financially responsible for what. Keep detailed records and have a very specific budget. This is important in allocating resources as well as in preparing taxes.

4. **Use available community programs and services.** Contact your local or state agency on aging to find out about available programs. Hire home-care if necessary, but be careful whom you get. Use day care if possible. Often a special bus will pick up an older adult and drop them off later. Get your parent involved in a local senior center. One of the most important measures of health in an elderly individual is the number of social contacts that a person has. This kind of contact is especially important for a widowed parent who is feeling isolated.

5. **Agree on a target date for departure for your young adult. Cut the apron strings.** Granted, that is more difficult to do if children are still tied to your purse strings. For children to act like adults, steps must be taken or the dependency can drag on indefinitely. Even if the departure date changes, it gives everyone parameters and an opportunity to bring up the subject.

6. **Respect one another's privacy.** All generations should have their own lives, independent of each other. It is important to define personal boundaries and personal space. All family members need to work to help "keep the lid on." This approach requires constant monitoring of events and family members' behaviors and feelings. It further requires the translating of individuals' feelings and behaviors for other members at critical times.

   For example, Grandma may have to be pacified in regard to her concerns about the children's dress or their unwillingness to attend church on Sunday mornings. On the other hand, Grandma's inflexibilities and seemingly outdated values may need to be interpreted at critical moments to the younger generation.

7. **Take care of your own family, your marriage, and especially, take care of yourself.** You do a great disservice to yourself, your partner and your marriage if the stress overload is too great and you burn out. Here are some suggestions in dealing with your own family. These are appropriate whether or not adult children or frail parents live in the same household.

   - ***Don't neglect your own family to take care of your parent.*** Don't ignore whatever seems to be functioning to "oil the squeaky wheel." Sometimes family members who seem to be doing fine really are not.
   - ***Make caring for your parent a responsibility for the whole family.*** It is not just the adult daughter's job. Other siblings as well as children are close to their grandparents and are willing to help.
   - ***Make everyone in the family aware of any problems.*** Full explanations are important. If an adult has Alzheimer's, for instance, it can be very frightening and very challenging. Acceptance and responsibility often come with proximity. But others must be expected to share the burden.
   - ***If a parent moves into your home, that person should have their own room and phone.*** Always discuss expectations in advance. Are you going to have to take time off work to

care for the parent? What are other family members' responsibilities? The family should continue regular activities as much as possible.

- ***Take the time for self-renewal.*** You must continue with your life, with your job. You are not good to anyone if you are overburdened with guilt about not doing enough. Highly stressed individuals are less effective and less efficient. You cannot totally put your life on hold.
- ***Take time for your marriage.*** Go out once a week with your spouse, doing something you both enjoy. Make a special effort to increase the amount of intimate time together. Don't let your marriage become a victim of the emotional fallout from the pressures of a multi-generational household.

Reuniting households sometimes works like a charm, other times it works less well, depending upon the temperament, flexibility, maturity, and threshold tolerance of all parties involved. Anguish, frustration, guilt, devotion and love are likely to be in the fierce tangle of emotions people experience. Parents of dependent adults may resent postponing long-deferred plans or depleting retirement savings because their adult children need cash.

Summary

The middle years are a unique period in which individuals experience the achievements of youth and encounter a diminishing parental life span. The burden can be especially heavy if other generations unexpectedly move into the household and if rules and expectations go undefined. The "empty nest" often becomes more cluttered than anticipated.

People in mid-life may be ready for relaxation and self-indulgence. But what they find is that their grown children aren't quite independent, and their parents may have moved or may be moving from autonomy to some degree of dependence.

It is important for all members of the family to deal with conflicts and communication issues before they become problems that require professional help. Programs that emphasize education and prevention of problems become important, and need to be used by the family. These may be especially important for the healthy functioning of multi-generation families so they can forge a workable and healthy living environment.

If the stress becomes too great and the conflict too high, it is important that family members seek the services of a competent family therapist who is skilled in inter-generational issues. This can be the best of times, or the worst of times for family members. Each person helps determine which outcome the family experiences.

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