



Photo © Andrew J. H. Sutterstock

The Sandwich Generation

Adults caught between the needs of the young and the old

By Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D.

An increasing number of women are finding themselves involved in the care of two generations: their children and their parents. Being Greek American can raise expectations about standards of care, but it can also provide a rich cultural heritage of support for the responsibilities involved.

Anna*, mother of three, quit her job to help her aging parents, but Maria had to continue working after her mother's stroke. Now Maria juggles the demands of home life, work and caring for an aging parent.

"It's not as simple as taking Mom avgolemeono soup or to the doctors," she said. "Over time, Mom's medical problems have multiplied and now I coordinate not two doctors, but six. I also research Mom's problems because when her doctors disagree, the family makes the tough decisions."

Maria also finds herself checking medical bills, dealing with insurance companies, home care agencies and hospital staff.

"Last night I was up until 3 a.m. making baklava for the hospital staff so they'll treat Mom better. We go as often

as possible, not just to bolster Mom's spirits, but to make sure Mom's kept clean and getting all her treatments."

Many stay at home parents, such as Anna, also find themselves caring for children and a parent. In fact, one out of every eight Americans ages 40 to 60 raise a child while also caring for a parent at home. Others, like Maria, manage the care of a parent who lives elsewhere. Irene, who travels from Washington, D.C. to Boston every other weekend to supervise her mother's care, is one of seven-to-10 million Americans assisting parents who live far away. All three women belong to the "sandwich generation," an ever increasing number of adults who find themselves literally "sandwiched" between the compelling needs of both children and parents.

A WOMAN'S BURDEN

Men, even single fathers, assume the double duty of parent and parental caretaker. But the weight of >>>

** Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the women interviewed.*

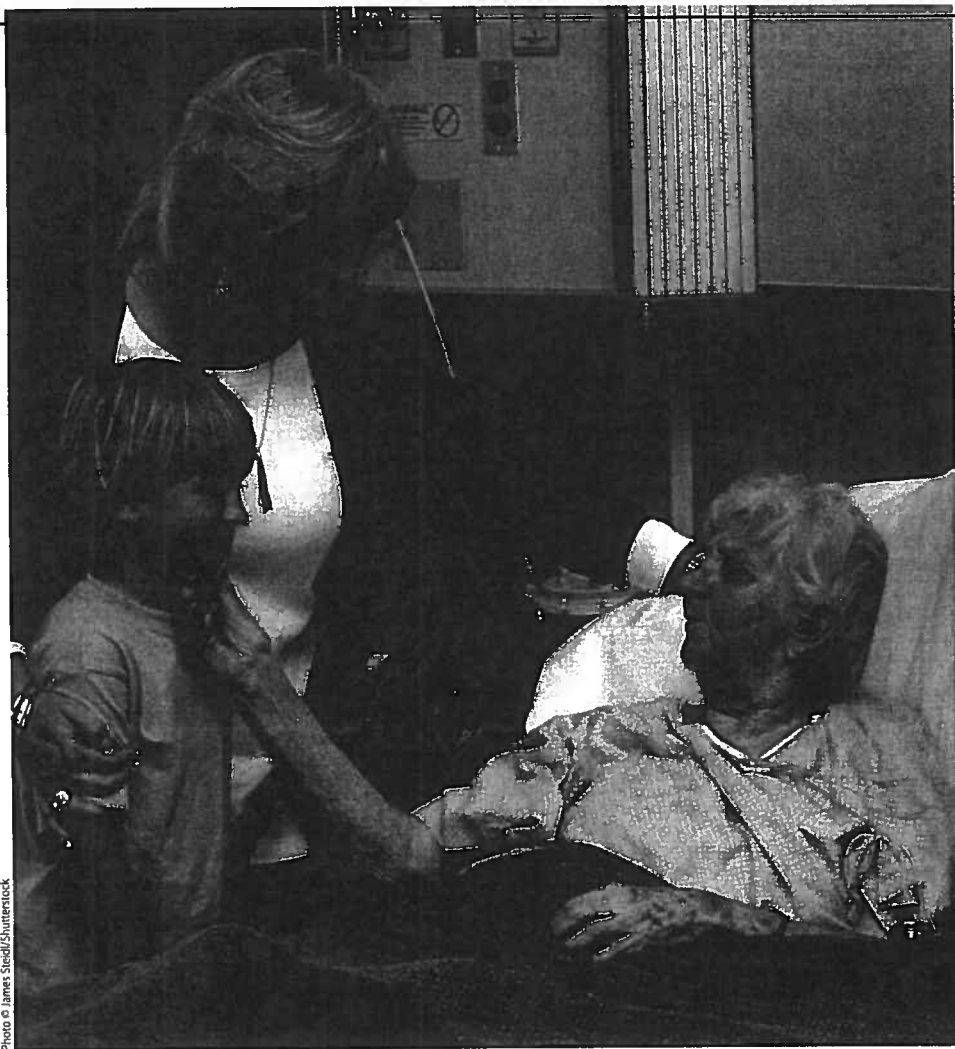


Photo © James Stieglitz/Shutterstock

both roles tends to fall more heavily upon women, especially those from ethnic groups where women traditionally have been expected to put their families first, before their careers or outside involvements. In some areas of Greece, custom mandated that the daughter inheriting the parental home or receiving the largest dowry care for parents in their old age; and the wives of men without sisters, for elderly in-laws.

Back home from her trips to Boston, Irene makes dozens of calls on her mother's behalf. "Thank God my boss doesn't mind all the calls I have to make. But I'll never get promoted," she said. "Neither will my husband. He's doing more at home now and can't take the training he needs to get ahead. I feel guilty about this, but what can I do?"

"When Irene wants to stay in Boston an extra day because her mom is lonely, I feel like screaming that the kids miss her and I'm lonely too," said Irene's husband Nick. "But I've come to respect Irene's family loyalty and realize that what she does for her mother, she'll do for me, or even my parents, if the

need arises. Now I tell her how much I admire her and she, in turn, thanks me for my support.

"The situation has forced us to manage our money better and to set aside time for our relationship, something we never did before. Even holding hands for ten minutes helps."

Irene is grateful to have grown up in a home free of marked dissensions, which allows her and her siblings to discuss their mother's care without the intrusion of unresolved past conflicts. However in families with histories of marital strife, abuse or addiction, the crisis of parental decline can exacerbate previous rifts or create new ones. Yet it can also provide opportunities to make peace with the past. Without a single word of forgiveness being spoken, there can be a softening in family relations. A more appreciative or caring tone can emerge as a result of the family's heightened awareness of the brevity of life.

"Dad's cancer brought all the old grievances out of the closet," recalled Voula, whose parents went through

Americans berate me for not putting myself first; Greeks, for serving my parents frozen dinners.

Yet Americans also envy our close family ties and my great aunt from Greece (who waited on her parents hand and foot) warns me not to be a martyr like she was.

—Voula

**"The reality of aging is terrifying, but it's forced me to think about what matters... and makes me more determined to enjoy my life."
—Voula**

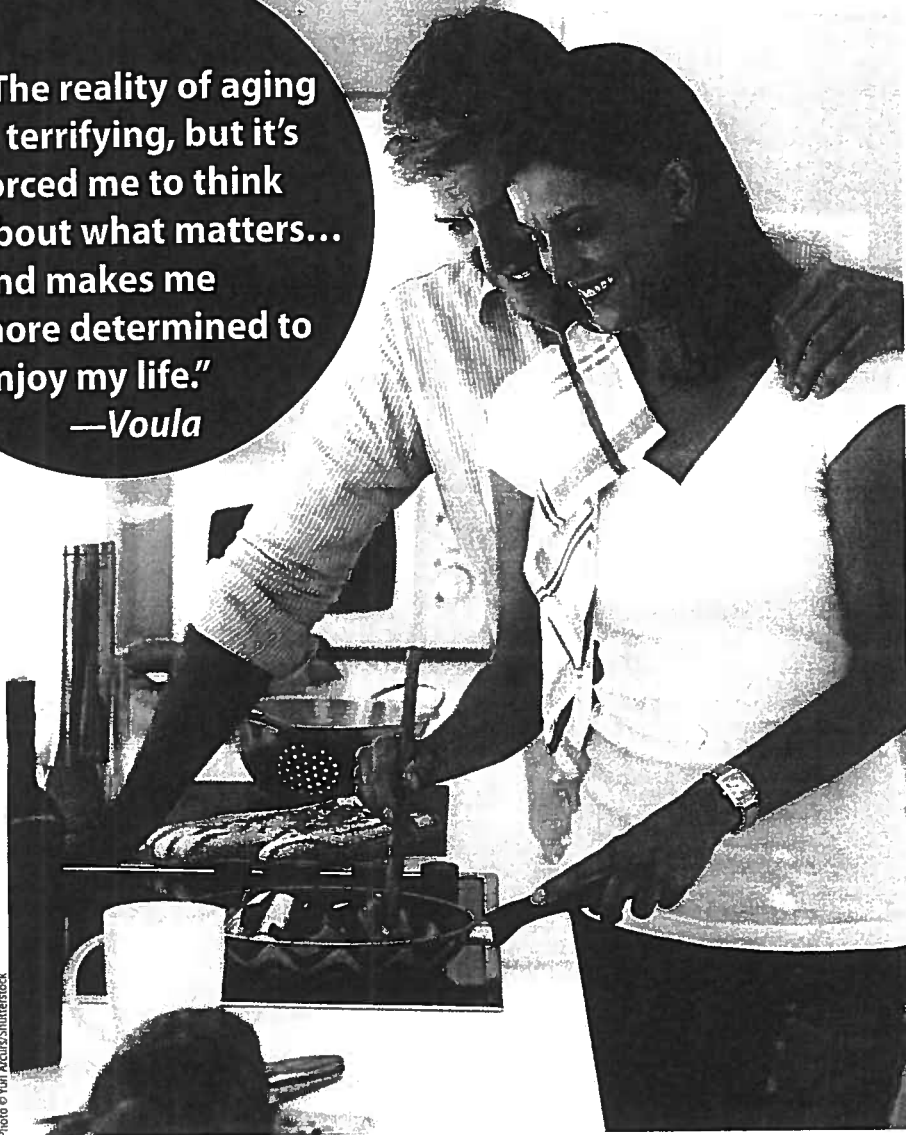


Photo © Yuri Arcurs/Shutterstock

a bitter divorce late in life. "But the seriousness of his condition put our past hurts into perspective and strengthened our family ties. Now I make a point of remembering birthdays and name days and, more importantly, of telling my family how much they matter to me."

But Voula still goes to bed exhausted. For her, as for the majority of the hundreds of women I've counseled in my 30 years as a psychologist, part of the exhaustion stems from expectations: expectations to carry on with parenting, workplace and other responsibilities as if she didn't have elder-care duties. It is not only the competing time demands that cause stress, but the cultural expectation that today's woman can "do it all" and "do it all perfectly."

SUPERHUMAN TASKS

Voula, whose female relatives worked

long hours in the family business while also caring for their children and parents, does not feel entitled to be fatigued or anxious, much less to complain. Instead she strives to be a "superwoman," thus avoiding the disapproval of others and guilt from within.

Yet even without trying to be superwoman, the added stress of eldercare often creates discrepancies between the realities of a woman's life and her image of her ideal self—of how she ought to feel or what she ought to be able to do—resulting in lowered self-esteem, self doubts and in some cases, clinical depression. Also, over time, as a parent ages, a woman can find herself doing more. The expectations of her personal capacity seem to increase as her tasks increase. Yet the additional time, energy and thought necessary to complete the new tasks may not

be recognized, either by the woman or by those around her. In fact, over time, others may have come to take her for granted and not be aware of the additional burdens she is carrying. This lack of recognition can further damage her self-image, especially if she (or others) tend to view her problems as signs of her inability to cope rather than as part of wearing so many hats.

"Americans berate me for not putting myself first; Greeks, for serving my parents frozen dinners," said Voula. "Yet Americans also envy our close family ties and my great aunt from Greece (who waited on her parents hand and foot) warns me not to be a martyr like she was."

Yet it's not mixed messages or Herculean to-do lists that cause Voula the most grief: it's watching her parents deteriorate. "To see my father in so much pain he can't pick up a pen and see the agony on his face when he was told he'd never see Greece again is absolutely devastating. Like the mythical Thetis who dipped her son Achilles into the River Styx in hopes of making him immortal, I want to spare Dad the ravages and indignities of old age. But no matter how much I do, I can't restore his vitality."

Voula tries to focus on enjoying the time she has left with her parents. Yet she knows their days are numbered and that eventually she'll be in the same position. "The reality of aging is terrifying, but it's forced me to think about what matters in life and makes me more determined to enjoy my life."

Other care managers report benefits such as increased self-reliance, self-acceptance and appreciation for the fragility and brevity of life; improved ability to tolerate uncertainty, handle crises and manage strong emotions; greater tolerance of, compassion for and faith in others and spiritual growth.

The Rev. Dr. Steven C. Salaris of the All Saints of North America Orthodox Christian Church in Maryland Heights, Mo., who regularly counsels people with sandwich generation problems, points out that Christians are called upon to care for one another, including the elderly. "Helping Mom is a blessing. Because of my faith, I can dig into a well of patience, energy, wisdom and love I didn't know I had." ☪

Pitfalls to Avoid

By Aphrodite Matsakis

Those who care for a family member struggle daily to keep a balance. "I can't let the situation crush me... so I avoid certain pitfalls," said Voula. Here are a list of five common mistakes that caregivers make—mistakes that can make a difficult situation harder than it already is.

1 Self-Neglect

IN THE MIDST of so many concerns, a woman may tend to postpone not only activities that are emotionally or spiritually fulfilling for her, but also proper nutrition, rest, exercise and needed medical attention. If she neglects herself, eventually her physical and emotional reserves will be depleted, leaving her vulnerable to the development of any number of emotional and physical problems and the exacerbation of pre-existing ones.

Many medical problems are known to be stress-related: asthma, bronchitis and other respiratory illnesses; certain allergies; heart and digestion problems; headaches, backaches and other muscular pain; and urinary or bladder infections. The degree to which stress contributes to these problems is not clear. However, numerous medical experts have found that under conditions of extreme or chronic stress (such as caretaking and grieving), the immune system is suppressed. Also, the frequent release of adrenaline and other stress hormones increase susceptibility not only to stress related illness, but to viruses, infection and muscular degeneration.

Even if yiayia calls it pampering, self-care is mandatory. It is the foundation of one's strength.

2 Perfectionism

PERFECTIONISM IN ANY department of life is a form of self-sabotage.

One way to cope with perfectionism and establish realistic self-expectations is to separate the "junk" from the joy in your various roles. Think about what kind of person you want to be in relation to the people who matter to you. What activities are really necessary in each area of life? For example, what is it to be a good daughter? Is there a difference between loving and making *pastichio*? When does the cooking get in the way of loving? It helps to ask others what matters to them about your relationship. What changes can you make so you have more of the joy and less of the junk?

3 Not asking for help

NUMEROUS BOOKS, organizations and Internet resources provide guidance on handling the emotional and practical dilemmas of eldercare, from assessing nursing homes to coping with conflicting feelings. Low cost or free help may also be available from local social services, health departments or from community organizations such as the National Institute on Aging. Consult with your doctor, local hospital, library or the Internet to learn about available resources.

Emotional support is also critical, especially for women facing end-of-life issues. Talking with a member of the clergy, a therapist, or a trusted friend; joining an online, community- or hospital-based caregiver support group; increasing spiritual practices; or any other form of support can help maintain one's emotional strength.

"Greek music is my support group," says Athena. "...It reminds me that with my parents goes the passing of an age. I, and especially my children, will never be as Greek as they were. But now I'm more determined than ever to stay connected to my Greek heritage and to pass on its many gifts to the next generation."

4 Projecting into the uncertain future

DO NOT WASTE valuable psychic energy worrying about negative situations that may or may not occur and which, even if they do occur, cannot be planned for in advance because they involve too many unknown factors. This is not the same as making necessary preparations, such as locating assisted living or nursing home facilities in the event a parent may need one or finding back up home care services. As difficult as it may be, live one day at a time.

5 Judging your feelings

MOOD SWINGS, grieving followed by numbing, and conflicting, ever-shifting feelings towards the aging parent and others are to be expected, as are bouts of anxiety or depression caused by the lack of control over certain aspects of eldercare. These emotions are hard enough without the added burden of judging them to be "right" or "wrong." Behavior is what matters. ©