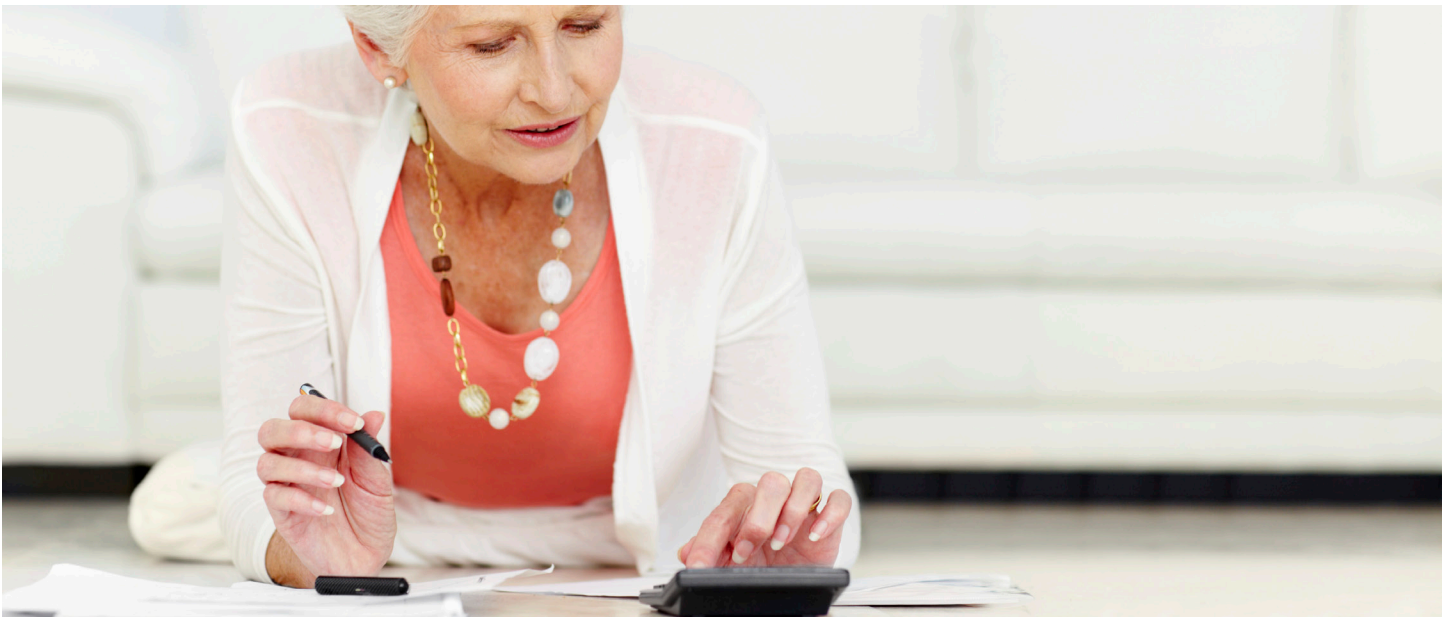


The Six Hidden Costs to Caring for an Aging Parent

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Adult children across the country belong to the sandwich generation. Like salami and the cheese, they feel squished between the responsibilities of their careers, elder care and raising their kids. Often, family caregivers sacrifice their own well-being and financial security to help their parents grow old gracefully.

The situation isn't easing anytime soon. The Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about trends, estimates that ten thousand people are now turning 65 every day. This so called silver tsunami will continue for the next three decades. At the same time, the Center on an Aging Society at Georgetown University reports that boomers age 65 and older are expected to increase at a 2.3% rate while the number of family members available to care for them will increase at less than 1%. The pressure on families now and in the future, particularly women, is immense.

Caregiving for an aging loved one isn't all doom and gloom. The rewards of caregiving are real but so are the hidden costs.

On the plus side, adult children see their role as "giving back" to someone special. The payoff is not monetary but it is an opportunity to care for a person who has been an important figure in their life – a mom who raised them alone or a dad who never let them down. Finding purpose and meaning through this labor of love makes all the work worth the time and effort.

But being a family caregiver is hard work. It demands a lot of time, patience and persistence. Those who start with realistic expectations reach out for help and plan ahead. They fare much better through the ups and downs than those who don't. The hidden costs of caring for a family member should be considered and planned for carefully.

What are the 6 hidden costs?

1. Dead-end career

The demands of taking care of a parent can impact productivity and increase absenteeism for the caregiver. Losing focus at work and taking time off to run Mom to medical appointments, manage home care schedules and address the inevitable crises that appear out of the blue seriously impacts opportunities for advancement. It's hard to shine at work when you are constantly leaving early, texting a homecare aide about daily routines or negotiating with your siblings about who is responsible for what.

2. Financial safety net vanishes

A 2011 study by Met Life estimated that men who reduced work hours to provide care for parents lost almost \$127,000 in wages and earned \$38,000 less in Social Security lifetime benefits. If they stopped working altogether, men gave up about \$284,000 in wages, pension and Social Security benefits over their lifetime.

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Women, on the other hand, fare even worse financially and are more at risk for poverty as a result of their efforts. Women typically need to cut back at work or stop working altogether. The Met Life study estimated that women who reduce their hours lose more than \$121,000 in lifetime wages and earn \$64,000 less in Social Security benefits over their lifetime. Leaving the work force to care for a parent hits woman's pocketbook even harder than a man's. A whopping shortfall of \$324,000 includes wages, pension and social security benefits over her lifetime.

3. The world gets smaller

As adult children become laser focused on the needs of frail parents, it stands to reason that their social support network shrinks. Ironically, this is when friendships matter most. It may be all a daughter can do to get home in time to throw together a quick microwaved meal, pay the bills so the lights stay on and help her kids get their homework done. For now, she reasons, friendships must take a back seat. Forget about the family summer cabin frequented each year, the annual girls' weekend away or a short ski trip. A common caregiver refrain is, "there just isn't enough time to take a break."

4. Stress overload

It's a domino effect. The more time family caregivers spend putting the needs of others first, the more their resilience slips away. It doesn't help that most stumble into their role with little preparation, knowledge or support about how to manage all of the complex issues. This can set up well-meaning family members to feel like failures. Many quickly experience frustration, feel drained, guilty, helpless or completely burned out. Ayala Pines, a researcher on the subject of burnout, defines it as "a state where highly committed individuals lose their spirit." We're not talking about just a little stress here—burnout occurs when caregiving no longer feels meaningful because of the emotional overload and numbing exhaustion!

5. Illness strikes

Failing to take time off to recharge and refocus triggers a deep stress reaction. Physical health begins to suffer. Many caregivers neglect their annual screening exams and simply ignore their own medical problems allowing them to fester for far too long. The Family Caregiver Alliance warns that chronic conditions including heart disease, cancer, diabetes and arthritis occur at nearly twice the rate compared to non-caregivers. Studies show that caregivers are also at higher risk for premature death; as much as 63% higher if they are experiencing "caregiver strain."

6. Emotional well-being suffers

Melancholy can set in and overwhelm even those who, under normal circumstances, project a sunny attitude. Sadness, loneliness and anger are common feelings everyone experiences now and then. But it's a problem when these negative feelings persist relentlessly day after day. Tending to someone with heavy care needs or a parent suffering from dementia tests even the most patient person. Those who perceive they are all alone on their caregiving journey are at highest risk for experiencing full blown depression and anxiety.

Help and hope is just a phone call away

Marshalling help is possible and necessary. Ideally, families should meet with an expert to plan ahead before starting down the caregiving path. An assessment of needs, available resources and creating an action plan to address

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challenges can help family members assume control of the situation.

But if this step is missed, it's never too late. When exhaustion takes a foothold, a consultation with an expert should be the first order of business.

What are the options for help? Aging Life Care™ managers offer a holistic perspective and can forge a positive path forward. For some families, meeting one or two times with an Aging Life Care™ manager is enough to get things moving back on track. If desired, they can also coordinate day to day tasks allowing adult daughters and sons to focus on their careers and the responsibilities of parenting their own children. Skillful problem solvers, these professionals take charge of those inevitable crises just as easily as routine needs. To find one go to aginglifecare.org and search for a practitioner in your area.

Other options include reaching out to a social worker at the Alzheimer's Association, a Senior Center or your local Area Agency on Aging.

***JULLIE GRAY** has over 30 years of experience in healthcare and aging. She is a Principal at Aging Wisdom in Seattle, WA. Jullie is the President of the National Academy of Certified Care Managers and the Past President of the Aging Life Care Association. Follow her on LinkedIn and Twitter @JullieGray, or email her at jgray@agingwisdom.com. Aging Wisdom has a presence on Facebook – we invite you to like our page.*

SOURCES

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