

Sandwiched in the middle

• DR. BATYA L. LUDMAN

A man commented to me, “Our last child recently got married, and we also became grandparents. We travel to see our children living abroad and visit an elderly and ailing mom in an assisted living residence. We really are the sandwich generation – helping to look after the needs of those who came before us and those who come after us, trying to eke out a little time for just us, whenever possible. We dream of retiring and having a *real* vacation, just the two of us, but can’t quite imagine it, given our other responsibilities.”

A lovely woman, just shy of middle age, came in to my office with a history of multiple somatic complaints. Referred to me by her family doctor because of stress related to family issues, I was indeed impressed with how sad and exhausted she looked. Trying to deal with the needs of three very busy and difficult preteen and adolescent daughters, along with her aging parents, one of whom was quite sick, she appeared to have the weight of the world on her shoulders. She herself was coping with menopause, which left her with hot flashes, night sweats, erratic and interrupted sleep, irritability and difficulty concentrating. Moderately depressed, she was struggling with not being able to decide whose needs to attend to first within the multitude of multigenerational problems.

It is never easy to attend to your own needs, when those of your parents or children seem so pressing. Yet if you neglect your own issues, you may very well suffer even greater emotional and physical distress in the future.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

1. Plan in advance as best as you can, while recognizing that there inevitably will be times when everything falls apart, you’ll suddenly need to re-prioritize things and there will be little you can do about it. Sanity will return – just not according to your preferred timetable. As with many other things, learn how to “let it go.”

2. Schedule “me” time and “us” time, whenever possible, seeing these as priorities. If you don’t schedule time for yourself, you may end up feeling resentful, quick-tempered and burned out, just when you need to be more readily available for others.

Similarly, if you put your relationship with your partner on the back burner, you may discover that there’s no relationship left, once things calm down. The reality is that things never really calm down completely. It’s easy to make excuses, but relationships need both quality and quantity time in order to thrive, so date night is important. At the very least find time in the evening to catch up with each other.

Review your day and do what you can to move on, planning as best as possible for tomorrow, so that you can unwind and attempt to get a good night’s sleep.

3. Learn how to say “no.” Don’t be afraid to let someone know that you’re unable to do what’s being asked of you right now. Sometimes you’ll need to rely on a sibling, a friend or others to problem-solve, while you take much-needed time to focus on something else. That’s okay. You cannot be everywhere, and spreading yourself too thin isn’t helpful for anyone. Give yourself permission not to be on call 24/7, take a time-out and have fun, or at the very least take a much-deserved break.

4. Recognize that this is a stage of your life where you may be experiencing loss on several levels.

It may be very hard to watch your own children make mistakes – whether big or small – or to acknowledge that they may need you less or differently, want their independence and have less time for you.

Frail and forgetful, your parents may also have their own issues but may not be aware of or refuse to acknowledge them, or not accept your advice, whether solicited or not.

You may be grieving over your own personal losses, with lots of questions that may never get answered. You yourself may want to be mothered as you mother, or want to ask your parents about parenting issues, aging, or historical family information,



(Kirk Lyttle/TNS)

but answers may remain forever elusive.

5. When family live at a distance, while you may have the advantage of not being constantly in the trenches, not having your finger on the pulse of daily events, having to rely on family members who may not share, be resentful, or not understand, may make being separated very difficult. You will need to find solutions for maintaining good and clear communication, whether with a partner, sibling, child or parent.

6. With so many intergenerational issues, it’s not uncommon to ask yourself if you are a good enough child, parent, grandparent or grandchild. Only you can answer in what capacity you can be there for someone else. No one walks in your shoes. You may not be able to help out as you would like, given your other priorities.

Be kind to yourself and suspend judgment of both yourself and others. You can only do what you can do. You may ask yourself why, if you’re such a good mom, you’re so impatient or quarrel so much.

As you parent, you may achieve greater understanding of your own parents. As you age, you may achieve greater understanding of the aging process. At times, you’ll simply have no answers.

7. Find time to exercise and eat healthily, even if on the run. Breathing and relaxation exercises are invaluable for stress reduction. Make sure to get enough sleep.

8. If you are having difficulties, make sure to talk with someone – whether a friend or a professional. A support group may also meet your needs.

Try to keep perspective. Recognize that you can’t always make everyone happy.

Guilt is self-defeating, so go easy on yourself. You are a good parent, child and spouse.

As difficult as this stage is, it will end. One day your children and grandchildren will be all grown up, and your parents and grandparents will no longer be with you. Today you are the important “filling” that holds everyone together. ■

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