

Conflict, Choices and Compassion

The New Realities of Caring for Aging Parents

BY NANCY A. SHENKER

What happens to the routines and priorities of an already over-extended family when an aging parent is no longer independent and needs support—emotional, financial or physical—from others? How do you make the best decisions for care, money matters and responsibility?

This challenging reality is already facing thousands of members of what has been called the “sandwich generation,” parents who are raising their own children and also helping aging parents.

Many Chappaqua families as well are discovering new alternatives and inner strengths to help their parents through tough times.

According to a recent survey conducted by the **National Partnership for Women and Families**, more than two-thirds of Americans under age 60 expect to be responsible for an elder relative within the next 10 years. Keep in mind too that half of all workers are also raising children under 18. This “sandwich” is complex and, at times, overwhelming.

“I always assumed my parents would take care of me—not the other way around,” Jodi Levine, a Chappaqua resident whose 70-year-old father suffers from Alzheimer’s, said. “You become a ‘parent’ to your parents, as well as to your kids.”

Robin Russell, a Chappaqua mother of two, is responsible for the welfare of both her 80-year-old parents. Her mother has Alzheimer’s and her father was diagnosed with lung cancer. “Talking about it is the first step toward finding alternatives,” Russell said. “I’ve always been very honest and open about my challenges. As a



Robin Fuller Russell, center, helps ensure the welfare of her parents, Deanne Muenzer Fuller and John Fuller.

result, people around me have come forward with their own experiences and suggestions—which helped me work out solutions.”

Making Critical Decisions... How Do Families Cope?

One of the biggest challenges in elder care is determining exactly what kind of assistance you and your parents need. According to Miriam Zucker, a social worker and founder of **Directions in Aging**, a 17-year-old New Rochelle consultancy specializing in geriatric issues, you should look at a variety of options when:

- You start to have concerns about your parent’s safety;
- Your parent is living alone (especially a distance away) and seems to have difficulty with daily routines and responsibilities;
- Your aging parent’s depression is affecting your marriage, your business or your family.

Depression is a common issue affecting the aging population. Even if your parents are in good physical health, you should be sensitive to

this condition, which is reported to affect more than 22,000 Westchester seniors this year. In fact, the **Cornell Institute of Geriatric Psychiatry at New York-Presbyterian Hospital** and Westchester County just received a \$1.5 million dollar grant to cover research, treatment and improved care for elder depression.

Whether an aging parent requires physical care or emotional support, your parents (in addition to you and your siblings) should play key roles in the decision-making process.

“Adults lose control of so much as they get older. They may lose their spouse, their health, their independence. Involving them in decision-making is essential, because it means they have control about some important aspects of their lives,” Zucker said. “And children have to sometimes allow their aging parents to make bad decisions.” If you do need to insist on something, Zucker recommended that you frame it as a request that relates to your own needs. For example, you can say, “Mom, it is really important to me that you agree to let someone look in on you. Otherwise, I’ll worry and I won’t be able to focus on other important things in my life.”

Mitch Kleinman, a Chappaqua resident, became concerned about his parents’ abilities to make critical decisions, to drive and to fend for themselves in an increasingly fast-paced and complex world. He has worked out a plan (a combination of out-of-home and in-home care) that lessens his worry and still enables his parents to lead independent lives. He took care not to force deci-



Ann Goodman Weinstein

Chappaqua residents Bill Torson, 68, and Austin Corley, 23 months, share good times together at My Second Home in Mount Kisco.

sions on his parents, he said, but rather encouraged them to be part of the process.

A Network that Works

Russell stresses the importance of surrounding herself with experts who help her work through the myriad of options, decisions and emotional issues. "I relied heavily on the Internet to find resources and information." (See "Where to Turn" for suggestions.)

In addition to agencies and the Internet, independent consultants are also starting to play a role in elder care planning. **Directions in Aging** provides a network of national geriatric workers for clients whose parents live a distance away.

Robin Miller, a registered nurse, works for **Lifeworx** in Chappaqua and helps families evaluate options and choose the short- and long-term plan that is best for them. Because of her health background, she is able to assess the adult's physical condition and recommend a range of appropriate options and resources. Holly Walters of Chappaqua, who formerly ran a childcare referral business, switched to geriatric care advisory services as a counselor at the national company, **A Place For Mom**, after going through the process of researching alternatives for her aging mother in Florida.

Why Advance Planning is Essential

The prices of elder care resources varies widely. Dedicated nursing home care costs can run as high as \$150,000 annually and New York

facilities are the most expensive in the United States, according to a *Crain's* New York Business report.

As a result, some families proactively consult their financial advisors about plans for elder care expenses—for themselves as well as their parents—before money becomes an issue.

"When I talk to a new client, I always discuss the whole picture—the parents' assets as well as the child's," said Dan Dodderidge, a financial advisor for Smith Barney and a Chappaqua resident. "A good financial plan should cover a person's full life cycle. As adults are living well into their 80s and beyond, long-term care coverage becomes a consideration. Insurance and saving for elder care are never easy topics to talk about. These are emotional, human issues, but critically important ones."

Another difficult area that aging parents and their adult children have to face involves property, paperwork and vital legal information. Miriam Zucker advises that an elder law attorney should act as the advisor and mediator, to help protect assets and act as an advocate for an aging parent.

Neil Reig, an elder care attorney with a practice in Mount Kisco, left his commercial litigation practice to become such an advocate.

Reig has practiced elder care law since 1987 and strongly encourages all adult children of aging parents to open an honest dialogue with their parents about their feelings and plans for the future. "Early discussion of important topics like financial assets, a living will, power of attorney (in case of sudden illness or stroke) helps prevent unpleasant situations in the future—such as disputes between siblings or a child's guilt that he made the 'wrong' decision for a parent."

New Options for Dignity and Independence

Over the past few years, the options for senior care have grown in

Westchester. In addition to in-home care, assisted living facilities, and nursing homes, day programs and independent living arrangements (with services tailored to the aging population) have sprung up throughout the county.

One such option is **Atria** in Briarcliff Manor. About a third of Atria residents have families in Chappaqua. Atria's director, Diana Morris, views it as a "community," rather than a home or facility. The residents (not patients) live in apartments rather than rooms and the staff fosters independence. Morris stresses the importance of little things like exciting food and regular celebrations of special events to help the residents feel important, valued and vibrant. Atria also offers short-term stay options for aging parents visiting from out-of-state. For example, during the recent hurricanes in Florida, some adult children flew their parents to Atria so they could be safe and well cared for until they could return home.

My Second Home in Mount Kisco is another nearby alternative for elder care. It was started six years ago by **Family Services of Westchester** as one of the first intergenerational adult day programs in the country.

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elder care attorney
Neil Reig

My Second Home is co-located with **Mount Kisco Day Care**, and seniors and children share activities and interaction every day in the 20,000-square-foot facility.

Executive Director Lois Pellegrino helped design the program, which includes “living room to living room” transportation, high-quality meals, and a variety of stimulating activities and conveniences—including massages, beauty parlor services, a greenhouse, a well-stocked library and computer stations, physical exercise like yoga and tai chi and day excursions. It is an ideal solution for working families whose parents live with them or nearby and need some extra care and social interaction while their family is busy at work and school. The program has even had participants whose grandchildren were right across the hall in daycare.

Convincing an aging parent to explore new living and care options can be a challenge. Dora, who is a participant in My Second Home with Henry, her husband, admits that Henry (who has Alzheimer’s) was resistant at first.

“He thought it was like a ‘nursing home’ and that he might not be coming back.” With encouragement from his wife and his son, Henry made the transition. He and his wife both enjoy the social environment. “When people retire, sometimes they don’t know what to do with themselves,” admitted Dora. My Second Home provides a variety of options, in a warm, safe and dignified environment. Participants who seek privacy can do so in a variety of rooms with home-like amenities.

When parents live out-of-state, making care decisions can be difficult. Susan Raab of Chappaqua consulted a geriatric care manager to develop a plan. “My father, who has Parkinson’s, really wanted to stay in Florida, so although my sisters and I were concerned, we found a way to make it work.” Many geriatric care advisors have a national network of elder care providers, so they can give assistance from a distance.

Raab, her sisters and her father eventually decided that her father should move closer to family. “As your parent’s health changes, you might need to make new decisions,”

she said. Through research and visits, they found a new facility that met everyone’s needs.

Spreading Love and Attention Around

One of the challenges expressed by children of aging parents is the difficulty in giving enough time and

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Susan Raab

energy to both their parents and their own children.

Levine talks about the impact of her father’s disease on her family.

“When my kids see other children’s grandparents doing ‘the grandparent thing,’ I feel sad for them that can’t have that same experience. I also need to make sure that my mother—who is still in good health—is able to retain some independence and not become the primary caregiver. I always question whether I’m making the right choices. But you do the best you can.”

Russell explained her parents’ health issues early on to her children and talks to them frequently to make sure they understand that although they are her top priority, her own mother and father are important too. She goes out of her way to make alternative care arrangements at times, so that she can focus exclusively on her children. “Achieving that balance is very important for everyone’s well-being.”

The “Right” Path

Every elder care decision is unique, based on one’s own family’s needs and values, the parent’s health and wishes, financial situations and a variety of other factors.

Adult children seeking solutions for their parents may face issues related to housing, health care, emotions

(yours, your parents or your kids’), work/life balance or critical financial or legal decision-making. Seeking the help of others who have been through a similar situation or are experts in elder care can help and reveal a host of options that might work. See “Where to Turn” for resources.

“The important thing is to be honest,” Kleinman said. “Be honest about the situation and respect your parents’ dignity and the right to lead a happy life at any age.”

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Where to Turn

The following are just a few elder care resources recommended by the professionals and families in this article:

Local

Westchester Department of Senior Programs and Services
813-6300
www.co.westchester.ny.us/aging

Family Services of Westchester
937-2320
www.fsw.org

National

United States Department of Health & Human Services
www.hhs.gov/aging

National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers
www.caremanager.org

National Association of Elder Law Attorneys
www.naela.com

General Information about Elder Law for Consumers
www.seniorlaw.com

Generations United
www.gu.org

State

New York State Office for the Aging
www.aging.state.ny.us