

# The Women's Times

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FOCUS: THE SANDWICH GENERATION by Eugenie Sills

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## Taking Care

Negotiating the emotional landscape

At this time last year Lin Schreiber's mother was so ill she was barely functioning. On heavy doses of morphine, administered to manage the pain of metastasized breast cancer in her spine, the 82-year-old had dropped to 98 pounds and by all indications, her daughter says, was not likely to live until her next birthday. So last February, Schreiber did what millions of other baby boomers have done: she brought her mother home to live with her.

Schreiber, whose Berkshire-based speaking and coaching business is called Revolutionize Retirement, expected that finding good medical care outside of a major metropolitan area would be the biggest challenge the family faced. "We were wrong," she says. "We found extraordinary medical care quickly and relatively effortlessly. Today, Mom's off all medication except the daily hormone pill that has temporarily arrested the growth of the cancer, she's gained 14 pounds, turned a feisty 83 in September and is about to move into her own apartment."

In fact, Schreiber says, the difficulties they faced had little to do with health care. "Instead our challenges were melding two very different generational styles: the 'Boomer spillour-guts, tell-everything-we're-feeling-thinking-needding...always' method versus the 'Depression Era we do NOT talk about what we're feeling, thinking or needing...ever' method; warring eating styles—crunchy granola vs. Reese's Peanut Butter Cups; and a free-spirited husband who's had to tame his penchant for journeying to the John at night in the altogether." In addition, she adds, "I learned how easily a 55-year-old woman can turn into a 10-year-old around her mother and how easily [a daughter] can become the mother to her mother."

### Highly Charged

Carol Abaya, who spe-



Photo by Julie McCarthy

cializes in elder/parent care and aging issues and writes a syndicated column titled, "The Sandwich Generation," says that for the 25 percent of American households involved in some form of eldercare, these emotional issues are the most challenging of all. "From the elder's point of view, they've been an adult for decades and they are now becoming needy," Abaya says. "People don't like to ask others for help, they don't like losing their capabilities. There's emotional resentment and loss."

When Julie McCarthy's mother, who suffers from dementia, was no longer able to balance her checkbook, her daughter took control. "That was actually the biggest source of conflict for us," says McCarthy, a photographer who lives in western Mass. "She was furious when I took her checkbook away."

"It's role reversal," Abaya says. "The [adult child] has to take the leadership role in the relationship; they have to make decisions." It's a charged issue, she notes, because it goes against the deeply ingrained idea that "a parent is always a parent and a child is always a child."

For those dealing with dementia or Alzheimer's disease, there is loss of another kind. "It's been in stages," McCarthy says, as she recalls sitting with her mother during a recent emergency room visit. "There was nothing I could talk about with her. I couldn't distract her because I couldn't relate to her—it was another level of loss. I can't reach her and I'm so irrelevant in her life. It's a very odd thing. She knows I'm her daughter—for instance, she wanted me in the ambulance with her—but there is no motherly instinct on her part

anymore." Instead, McCarthy finds herself in the parenting role.

### What's New

Role reversal may not be new—after all, younger generations have always cared for their elders—but experts say baby boomers do face unique challenges. Middle-aged boomers, who represent 29% of the U.S. population, are charged with caring for elders who are living longer lives and requiring longer-term care. The medical advances that allow elders to live with illnesses and disabilities that would have killed them a few decades ago also leave them more dependent.

True, there has been a significant increase in living options to care for these seniors—from traditional retirement homes to continuing care facilities and home care agencies—but the bulk of their care still falls to family. And that family is increasingly unavailable, Abaya says, and not just because more women are in the workforce. "Going back 50 years, families tended to live in a narrower geographic area, so there was generally someone close by who could help out [with an aging relative]. You don't have that now."

With their families often spread out around the globe, boomers and their parents must make do with long-distance caregiving. The attendant problems go beyond logistical issues, Abaya points out—it can intensify emotional issues too. "If the parents are in Massachusetts, and the kids have been living in Chicago for 15-20 years... they're not likely to have established an adult-to-adult relationship. You've got a situation where the parents still look on the kids as kids."

### What's in that Sandwich?

Among the most significant changes on the caregiving landscape is the increasing number of adult children who find themselves "sandwiched" be-

tween aging parents and their own growing children. McCarthy is typical of many baby boomers who waited to have children until their 30s and 40s. Rather than being empty nesters with more flexibility to care for aging parents when they reach their 50s and 60s—as many of their parents were—they are still raising those children when their parents needs first arise.

Staying on top of her finances wasn't the only thing Julie McCarthy realized her mother had stopped doing four years ago. "She was withdrawing from everything—not going to meals," McCarthy recalls. "She was emotionally unstable. I wasn't sure what was going on, but I knew she couldn't stay in her own apartment, so she came to live with us."

Suddenly, McCarthy found herself balancing the needs of three generations. Her daughter, Maddy, 14 at the time, was getting ready to head off to boarding school. "I was feeling abandoned by everybody," McCarthy says. "I was feeling like I had to make sure everything was okay with my mother, I was helping Maddy with her SATs and applications—it was stressful. Everything with Maddy was full of promise and the future, and with my mother it was about everything being negative and about taking things away, taking on more responsibility for her."

Four years later, with her mother nearby in an assisted living facility, McCarthy's juggling isn't done. Recently, she says, "I had promised my daughter that I would go down to school to meet with her and then I get this call at 8:30 a.m. that my mother is being transferred to the emergency room... There I am negotiating with the doctor to see how quickly I can get out of there. I was definitely feeling sandwiched, feeling stuck."

### Social Impact

What's the social impact

of all this? "Society still expects women to do it all, and a good number of women either quit their jobs to stay home or reduce hours in order to do these elderparenting chores," Abaya says, noting that this still isn't talked about much. "What happens to this woman? She has worked fewer years and has contributed less to social security and has fewer pension rights when she retires, she's going to be less well off than if she'd continued working."

There's also a trickle down effect, she says, because women's salaries are often used to pay for their kids college. "If she's not making as much, she can't help, which means the younger generation needs to work their way through college or get more financial aid—leaving them with greater debt burdens after their schooling."

Businesses lose too—to the tune of almost \$30 billion each year, according to Abaya. "Let's say Mom is home and has to take medicine with her lunch. She's a little forgetful, so her daughter calls her everyday to remind her to eat and take her medicine. For 15-20 minutes before that call, the daughter is mentally diverted; for another 15-20 minutes after the call she's distracted. That's a half hour *everyday* of lost productivity."

### Silver Lining

Despite the emotional roller coaster both caregivers and care receivers experience, there are benefits. "As challenging as it's been, there have been enormous gifts," Schreiber says. "Part of it is the opportunity to grow and heal more of [the emotional] stuff before my mother dies. My father died when I was 20 and I spent the next 20 years figuring that stuff out."

There's also an opportunity to bond that might otherwise not arise, Abaya says. Schreiber agrees. "It's helped us each get to get to know each other as we've never known each other... When she first came, my mother was very ill, but it was the closest I've ever felt to her. All the façades fell away and it was as if I was seeing her as she really was for the first time."

McCarthy, too, appreciates the natural rhythms of the experience. "I was taking away things from my mother and giving independence to my daughter at the same time. It's all really good and natural, the fact that Maddy is becoming this independent young woman, and the ties are loosening with both [she and my mother.] It helps having both ends of the spectrum. It helps to put it in perspective. It makes it a continuum that I can understand."



Photo by Julie McCarthy