

Balancing Work and Caregiving: Tips for Employees¹

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Providing care for older family members has become a way of life for millions of Americans. In fact, nearly one in ten American workers is a caregiver. By 2007, 15.6 million Americans will be trying to balance working and caregiving responsibilities.

Nearly half of caregivers are employed full-time. Another 11% are employed part-time. Employed caregivers struggle to balance their time and energy between work and caregiving. Caregivers are often exhausted, burdened, and stressed.

Employed caregivers often find it necessary to turn down training opportunities or promotions. They may take early retirement or simply quit their jobs altogether. Lost work opportunities take a financial and emotional toll.

Caregivers not only lose current income and benefits. They also face reduced retirement income. Over a lifetime, the average caregiver gives up nearly \$700,000 in "wage wealth." Wage wealth includes lost wages, lost Social Security income, and lost pension benefits. Caregivers who enjoy their jobs and who are friends with their coworkers may also become depressed and lonely after quitting.

Men and women seem to have different caregiving responsibilities. Male caregivers are more likely to work full-time. They also spend less time providing care. As caregiving gets harder and takes up more time, women pick up more of the responsibility. As a result, female caregivers are more likely to cut back their working hours or to quit work completely to provide care.

What Can Employed Caregivers Do?

- Openly and honestly describe the situation before it becomes a problem.
- Let your employers know that you are committed to your job. Make sure they know that you don't want to let them down.
- Be honest about the fact that you need your job and your benefits, but that you want to be a dependable and valuable employee.
- Focus on what your employer needs. Think about how you can work together during this hard time.

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- Remain professional. Know what you need before you meet with your supervisor. Try to come up with solutions that are creative but practical.
- Be realistic. If your position involves meeting with clients, asking to work evenings is not realistic. On the other hand, if you are making sales calls by phone, you may be able to telecommute from a home office.

Learn What Help is Available

Contact your company's human resources department for assistance. Ask to speak to someone who knows about caregiving and aging issues.

If you think you will need to leave work temporarily to provide full-time care, learn about the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA). FMLA provides job protection for employees who must leave their jobs for family medical concerns, such as providing care for a critically ill family member.

Take Steps to Help Yourself

Employed caregivers can take steps to make caregiving less stressful.

Manage Phone Calls

Care receivers may get into the habit of calling for any little thing, or simply because they are lonely. Long, involved phone calls are especially stressful.

Set limits on phone calls. Schedule regular times when you will call and check in. Refer to *Caregiver's Contacts: How to get the Help You Need (FCS 2258)* to make good use of your time when locating services by phone.

Support Your Support System

Give your support system time to work. Women are often guilty of the "It's easier if I just do it myself" syndrome. After a while, other people quit offering to help...either because you never let them, or because you've sent the message that you'd just as soon "do it yourself." (This suggests that you don't trust anyone else.) Don't jump in and take over because something doesn't happen as quickly as you think it should.

Avoid Teaching Helplessness

When you are pressed for time, waiting for your mother to brush her hair and put on a sweater seems to take forever. Brushing her hair and putting her sweater on for her is much faster. Over time, though, she will begin to believe that she is helpless...and to need more and more help.

"Learned helplessness" occurs when we always do things for or make decisions for people, instead of letting them do it themselves. Over time, people come to believe that they are not capable of doing anything for themselves.

Sometimes, of course, it is faster to "do it for" someone than to wait for them to do it themselves. People with disabilities do need certain kinds of help, but teaching people to be helpless costs the caregiver and the care receiver in the long run.

Set Priorities at Home and Work

What are your priorities? What is most important, and what can you let go? Are home-cooked meals a priority in your life? Is being a caregiver your highest priority? Is spending time with your spouse or children your highest priority? Is your job your most important priority? These are often difficult decisions to make, but sometimes circumstances dictate priorities.

What if you were to lose your job because you missed so much time providing care? What would that mean for you and your family? If keeping your job has to come first, you will need to ask someone else to help. For instance, you may need someone else to take your care receiver to the doctor for you. At some point, you may need to place your care receiver in adult day care or a nursing facility. These are very difficult decisions.

Compartmentalize Your Life

Try to "work when you work," "give care when you are caregiving," and "play when you play." Schedule separate times to be with your children and your care receiver. Everyone will feel more satisfied if they get your complete attention for even a short time, instead of sharing you.

You may have to take the kids with you to check on grandma. But when this happens, neither the children nor grandma feels like they've really had special time with you. Maybe you can stop and check on your mother before you pick the kids up from daycare. Maybe you and your kids can stop for ice cream or at the park before you go to your mother's.

Ask For and Accept Help

No matter where you live, there are resources available to help you as a caregiver. Contact agencies for help.

Check with your employer. Is there an Employee Assistance Program (EAP)? Can Human Resources (HR) help?

Phone 2-1-1 for help locating services.

Contact the Eldercare Locator. Call toll-free, 1-800-677-1116, or go online to <http://www.eldercare.gov/Eldercare/Public/Home.asp>. They will put you in contact with your Area Agency on Aging.

Communicate Honestly and Often

Make time to communicate clearly with your:

- employer
- family
- friends
- care receiver
- coworkers
- spiritual leader
- self

References

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For More Information

This is one of six publications in a series on caregiving and aging. The other publications in this series are:

FCS 2257: Long-Term Care: Places to Call Home (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY869>)

FCS 2258: Caregiver's Contacts: How to Get the Help You Need (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY870>)

FCS 2259: Puzzled by Your Care Receiver's Refusal of Services? (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY871>)

FCS 2261: Balancing Work and Caregiving: A Guide for Employers (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY873>)

FCS 2262: Final Wishes: End-of-Life Decisions (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY874>)