

**I am a single parent of two active teenagers. My parents are in their 70's and active, although some health problems have started to arise. They need me to take them back and forth to doctor appointments and help them with shopping, and a variety of other time consuming activities. Problem is, my children also need me to be available to them. I also work. I am feeling pulled in many directions, and I can't do it all.**

My hat is off to you for even attempting to balance the demands of three generations with very separate and distinct needs. Yes, I said three. You weren't even factoring yourself and your needs into the mix of conflicts were you? The term "Sandwich Generation" was coined about this very contemporary situation. You are one of many adult individuals who find themselves "sandwiched" in between the needs of the two generations of their aging parents and their still dependent children.

The stress of this time consuming, energy draining, emotion and often guild-laden juggling act falls on the person who connects the generations. Most often, the Daughter/Mom is the one who arranges transportation, Doctor visits, social activities, family and holiday events, preparation of food and shopping, entertainment/outings, being a confidant and problem solver, and generally being relied upon for decision making regarding housing, medical care, etc, in other words, being the responsible "grown-up". Notice here that all of the activities and responsibilities are needed for both ends of the generational spectrum. The one in the middle is the one who juggles some or all of these for their parent(s) and all of them for their child.

What to do? As long as you continue to choose this role with your parents, you must learn to set boundaries and limits on what you can be reasonably expected to do and what you are willing to do. This can work easily if you have parents who truly do as much for themselves as they can and are willing to look for assistance from resources other than you. With them doing tasks for themselves, and being open to help from others (Services for the Elderly), a harmony and balance can exist. You can partner with them. They will recognize and appreciate what you are doing for them and can maintain their sense of dignity and pride. Many aging parents have been heard to bemoan the fact of being a "burden" on their children.

If, however, your parents try to line themselves up as the biggest focus in your life, compete with your other responsibilities, and resent your making choices about your time allocations that do not set them and their needs as a priority, you may be in for some conflict. With parents like these it is absolutely essential that you set those boundaries and limits. Let them know what you can do for them, how long you can spend with and on activities for them, and how often you can be available. Giving them a schedule of the time they can have you available to them, can be very comforting to them. What you ultimately offer them may not feel sufficient to them, but they will be able to understand over time that they can rely on your availability and can then structure their needs to be met during those times.

Incidentally, the same structure noted above is also most useful for managing your time with your children. If you let them know what you can or cannot do with your time and energy, they can better plan to utilize your offerings to their best advantage. You can, for example let your children know that you will be able to take them to the mall for 2 hours every other Saturday afternoon. That will enable them to set their needs around your availability and allow you the time to shop for yourself, or run an errand during that time.

Aging parents and children both benefit from some structure and consistency, and you will

benefit by feeling more in control of your time and energy level.

Now for the part your letter left out. You, the meat of the sandwich. You MUST take time for yourself. YOU must take time for yourself. You must take TIME FOR YOURSELF! I can think of no other way to emphasize this point. If you do not “pay” yourself first, you will be forever operating at a deficit of energy, self-care, emotional fulfillment, etc. Ironically, if you cheat yourself of opportunities to care for yourself, you will ultimately not have the energy to help or be useful to anyone else, child or parent, at least not without endless exhaustion and resentment towards those who pull at you for time and attention.

Create some time for yourself in a way that best fits YOUR needs. Whether it is a few hours a couple times a week, one whole afternoon or day, or an hour or two a day. Take some time. You need it, you deserve it, your whole being cries out for it. The better you are to yourself, the better you can be for those you love.