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Caring Across Generations:



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Strategies for the Sandwich Generation in the COVID-19 Era



Caring for both aging parents and children at home can be stressful in the best of times. The coronavirus pandemic amplifies this challenge, as we all navigate transformed landscapes of work, education and health care. For this reason, multigenerational caregivers may want to take a few extra measures to keep themselves strong and their families safe in the COVID-19 era.

According to the [National Alliance for Caregiving](#), more than 44 million Americans act as unpaid caregivers for loved ones. Of those, 28 percent comprise the “[sandwich generation](#)” — those individuals, usually in their forties and fifties, who provide care for both children at home and aging parents who are ill, injured, or simply struggling with the challenges of daily life.



With the onset of COVID-19, family caregivers may also be among the millions of Americans who have lost jobs, or may now be required to work at home rather than in an office, while also caring for a houseful of people. Reduced access to outside care and activities for both elders and young people means both generations are at home more. In addition, many Americans may be newly “sandwiched,” with older loved ones increasingly vulnerable and isolated due to the pandemic, and with children who are normally at school or college now newly at home.

I recently spoke with professional caregivers at [Partners in Care](#), the licensed home care services agency where I work, and an affiliate of the [Visiting Nurse Service of New York](#), about key “Do’s and Don’t’s” to help these double-duty caregivers navigate the new normal, maintaining their own peace of mind while helping loved ones of all ages remain healthy.

DO... Educate and Empower

As with all healthcare challenges, knowledge is power. Choosing a few reliable sources (such as the [Centers for Disease Control](#) and [local health officials](#)), take some time to educate yourself on COVID-19 symptoms and preventive measures, including masking, social distancing and frequent hand-washing. Discuss those measures with both your children and older relatives, understanding that the different generations may have different concerns and different levels of understanding.



Discuss as a family what is acceptable and unacceptable in terms of safety and risk. If the children are going to school, will they interact with [older family members](#)? Children living in a home with grandparents or other older relatives should understand their additional responsibilities, including [being careful](#) about social distancing and masking while at school or with friends and limiting time spent indoors with others.

DON'T... Go It Alone

Given the unpredictability of the virus and its spread, build an extra layer of support into your safety net. Remember that you cannot do it all. Social distancing may prevent a wider circle of people from paying a visit, but explore which caregiving tasks can be carried out remotely — and then enlist others to help. Maybe a sibling can help with your parents’ online banking and bill paying, or help them get groceries delivered if they live on their own.

If you have teenagers — whose sports and after-school activities may now be limited — encourage them spend time with elder family members. Find [activities they can do together](#), including puzzles, board games or gardening, if you all live in the same house. Or, while social distancing, let technology help: how about the older and younger generation creating a family tree together over Facetime, or recording an oral history? Choose projects where everyone involved can work together towards a shared goal.

DO... Attend to Your Own Mental Health

The [emotional burdens](#) of the global pandemic are great and have shed new light on the importance of mental health awareness. One of the most important factors in caregiving is attending to your own mental health. This includes reaching out for support to loved ones, healthcare providers and/or community resources. Be sure to build in time for exercise and [wellness](#), as well. You can even make it a multigenerational activity, modifying activities such as yoga or stretching for [older](#) and younger participants.



DON'T... Overlook Regular and Preventive Care

Despite the ongoing pandemic, chronic conditions still need to be managed, and unattended symptoms can worsen quickly in vulnerable elderly. Don't neglect your own health, either: It's common for caregivers to ignore their own symptoms as they focus their care on others.

Unlike the earliest days of the pandemic, most doctors' and dentists' offices are now open for physical visits, with extra safety precautions in place. Telehealth options are also [proliferating](#), which can be useful across the generations. Treat these virtual visits as you would a physical visit, [preparing questions in advance](#) and having a list of medications on hand, if that is part of the discussion.

Remember, too, COVID-19 isn't the only infectious illness to worry about. Make sure that you and those you are caring for — especially seniors and children — get the [flu vaccine](#) and practice good [preventive hygiene](#).



DO... Get a Good Night's Sleep

With the stress of caregiving during COVID-19, you may find it more difficult to get to sleep or stay asleep. But sleep is a crucial element for keeping up your physical strength and mental health. Caregivers can find a number of tips [here](#) for getting a good night's sleep.

DON'T... 'Tough It Out'

Prepare ahead by designating a back-up caregiver now, to step into the role if you get sick with the highly contagious coronavirus. While you may be able to provide care for children while ill — remaining socially distant and constantly wiping down surfaces — someone else should assume responsibility for the care of elderly loved ones if you are contagious.

DO... Inventory and Stock Up on Essentials

For all households, but particularly for those with elderly or otherwise vulnerable residents, experts recommend having on hand a 2-week supply of food and household essentials and a 30-day supply of medications (both prescription and over-the-counter). In addition, see if local Meals on Wheels programs are appropriate for the seniors you are caring for. And [ask](#) the doctor or pharmacy about filling prescriptions for a longer time period.

DO... Connect to Community Resources for Caregivers

There are many resources to support family caregivers trying to keep loved ones, especially the elderly, physically and emotionally healthy. They include:

- **Centers for Disease Control:** [General information](#) and a virus [self-checker](#)
- **American Association of Retired Persons (AARP):** [Caregiver Preparedness](#)
- **Visiting Nurse Service of New York**, the nation's largest not-for-profit homecare agency: [Caregiver resources](#)
- **National Council on Aging:** [Caregiver resources](#)

As the [National Alliance for Caregiving](#) reminds us, the coronavirus wake-up call is not only about providing solutions for elder caregiving, but also about creating a public health system that works for the way American families across generations live and age today.