

caring
for those
you care about

Balancing Work and Caregiving

You have a stressful deadline at work, and your father has awakened you every night this week. The home nurse doesn't come on time, and your supervisor asks why you were late to work again. Between taking your mother to doctor's visits and responding to crises, you've missed a lot of work, and you feel you're letting your coworkers down. Your parent needs full-time care, but you can't afford to quit your job or take time off.

Adult children caring for older parents face problems like these every day. Work is a financial necessity and/or a source of satisfaction for many. Yet the responsibilities of caring for parents and others and doing well on the job often conflict, and people who want to do both well can be caught in the middle. As a result, at times they may be distracted on the job, emotionally drained, and physically exhausted.

While balancing work and family commitments is never easy, many have developed effective strategies that can help. In addition, support for employee caregivers is becoming more widely available from employers and other community sources. This tip sheet presents an overview of the issues involved for employees and employers. It also

presents ideas that can help you manage your responsibilities more efficiently and balance both of your important roles more effectively.

Caregivers in the Workplace

More than 26 million American workers are also caregivers for their parents or older relatives and friends. While they share a common goal with their employers—maximizing productive time on the job—they also take their family commitments seriously. Although family caregiving can sometimes interfere with workplace performance, many employers are sympathetic to these demands. However, many employees are reluctant to be open with their supervisors about their caregiving responsibilities, fearing that it will affect their job security or career prospects.

Naturally, companies are concerned about the bottom-line impact of employee caregiving. Decreased productivity isn't good for business, and some companies have begun to provide support in the workplace for caregivers in hopes of minimizing the disruption. For example, some employers have instituted programs that provide information and referral to community services, such as counseling, respite care, or legal assistance; financial assistance for using community-based

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services such as adult day services; workplace caregiver support groups; paid leave for caregiver activities; and flexible time policies. However, many working caregivers are on their own.

Since 1993, federal law also has offered some support for working caregivers through the Family and Medical Leave Act. This law entitles eligible workers up to 12 weeks a year of unpaid leave for family caregiving without loss of job security or health benefits. Although this protection is valuable, it does not help those who cannot afford to take unpaid leave. The law also has a variety of restrictions that exclude many from coverage, such as company size and the amount of time a worker has been employed.

Coping with Double Demands

Each working caregiver's job is different, and even within the same company different managers may be more or less supportive of your situation. Consider the following suggestions, and adapt those that might work for you:

- **Find out your company's policy regarding caregivers**, and whether it offers benefits or services that could help with your situation. Ask your employer if there is an Employee Assistance Program. If you are uncomfortable raising this issue with your supervisor, look in the company's personnel manual or other human resources publications.
- **Ask your human resources or personnel department to give you information on the Family and Medical Leave Act.** Have them send a copy to your supervisor as well, if appropriate.
- **Take advantage of flex-time policies** and consider asking for a flexible schedule if a formal policy is not in place. If you work for a large firm in which other employees can cover times you are not there, or you work in a job where the focus is on producing certain outcomes rather than being available at set times, it may be easy for your employer to understand and allow for your need to work an unusual schedule.
- **Offer to work a less desirable shift** to get flex time, or be willing to make up time taken for caregiving by working days or shifts when most people want to be off. This flexibility on your part shows your employer that you are committed to the company and to your job.
- **Consider job-sharing or working part time** (as many family caregivers do) if it is feasible for you.
- **Whenever possible, avoid mixing work with caregiving.** If you have to make phone calls or search the Internet for information related to your parent's needs, do it on your lunch break.

- **Manage your time well** at home, at work, and when you must take time off for caregiving.

Strategies to consider: Set priorities for all these areas, then accomplish the most important items on your list first. Delegate responsibilities at work and at home; others can almost always take some of the burden. Pace yourself; don't do so much in one area that you can't be effective in another.

- **Get all the support you can from community resources.** While these can be important for all caregivers, those who also have outside jobs have particular needs.

- **Take care of your own needs.**

Strategies to consider: Pay attention to your health now more than ever. Eat right, get enough sleep, and exercise regularly. Try to make time for activities you enjoy even when your schedule is packed; fun is important. Take a break when the pressure gets too great; even a short walk or hot bath can help relieve the stress. Talk to someone about your feelings and needs — an employee assistance counselor, a professional counselor, or a member of the clergy.

- **Consider talking to your supervisor or manager at work** about your caregiving issues. It's better for them to understand the reasons you're coming in late or seem preoccupied than to let them draw their own conclusions. Chances are that your company will appreciate your honesty and sense of responsibility toward your family and your job.

- **Be sure to thank those at work** for the consideration and assistance you receive. Perhaps you could agree to take on an extra assignment or special project when you do have time, to help someone else who has heavy family or other responsibilities.

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