

When Your Aging Parent Needs Care

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Welcome to the High Wire

Balancing Your Life with Caregiving

Alise popped the succulent appetizer into her mouth, surveyed the faces of her friends, and joined in their laughter. The warmth of friendship and an all-too-infrequent sense of relaxation flooded her senses. But the feeling proved fleeting when she realized her cell phone was ringing.

While the chatter around her continued, Alise heard the voice of her college-age daughter.

“Mom, our flight’s been cancelled. We’ll be in Chicago overnight.”

“Did the airline get you a hotel?”

“Yes, but they’ve given Tom and me a room together.”

“What? They can’t do that!”

“Really, it’ll be okay, Mom. Besides, I’m afraid to stay in a room by myself in this airport hotel. We’ll see you tomorrow morning at 11:00. You *can* pick us up, right?”

“Yes, I’ll be there.”

Alise pushed the red button on her phone, realizing she now needed to find a substitute teacher for her Sunday school class and come up with the best way to tell her husband their only daughter was about to spend the night in a hotel room with her fiancé.

Sometime during her phone conversation, the server had brought the entrées. Alise carved her steak, took a bite, and tried to refocus on the conversation.

Across the table, Sarah continued the saga of her mother's week-long hospital stay following her fall. In addition to a urinary tract infection, Sarah's mother was hallucinating. Sarah had missed a whole week of work and was now searching for a full-time sitter for her mother.

As Alise voiced her understanding of Sarah's situation, her cell phone jangled again.

"Mrs. Brooks? This is Susan at Falling Leaves Manor. You're number one on the emergency list for Mrs. Bobo. I'm calling to let you know she slid out of her wheelchair."

"Even with the safety belt alarm?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Her back is scraped and we're concerned about her hip. She seems slightly disoriented so we're transporting her to the ER. Can you meet us there?"

"Yes, of course."

After fishing in her purse for enough money to cover her meal, Alise gave a fleeting glance at her hardly touched plate, accepted the consolation of her friends as she gave hugs around the table, and headed for the parking lot. Tears threatened to escape her brimming eyes, but she swallowed the emotion and resisted the urge to crawl into her car and drive as far away as possible.



They call us the Sandwich Generation. We are pressed, sometimes not too gently, between caring for our parents and living our own lives at the same time. A large number of us are still raising children. Some are helping to care for grandchildren. We come in all ages, shapes, sizes, and life situations. We're becoming an increasing majority among today's population, shouldering additional responsibilities and silently struggling with the ramifications. This stage in life is one that surpasses age barriers in the same way that parents, at any age, can share the joys and challenges of parenthood.

But others rarely want us to haul out a photo account detailing our

search for supplies for incontinence or the struggles of medication management. We're all just trying to get through each day and survive the seemingly endless challenges.

And it may not be until you're stuck between the platforms of your own life and that of your parents that you realize you're not only on a tightrope, but teetering with no pole for balance.

Here's your pole. It's our gift to you.

We're navigating the same tightrope you are. The only difference is we've had just a little more experience and have learned how to use the balance pole. Don't look down or be afraid. You're not alone, and we know that can make all the difference.

In this book, you'll read our stories and those of others. We'll share what we've learned and help you realize that your frustrations, fears, and seeming failures are normal. When tightrope-walking caregivers share their experiences, they form a unique bond. They can pass each other, even at a distance, smile, nod, frown, or just shrug shoulders and speak volumes of support without even saying a word. It's a special sisterhood. Though care isn't given just by women, we're still filling in the gaps of care with skills that gender predisposition and society have trained us to accept.

Baby boomers are hitting retirement age and finding themselves caught between caring for their aging parents and spreading the wings their parents taught them to use. Boomers have defined decades with an "I can do anything, anywhere" attitude. Now, when many of them are looking to show the world just how active and productive they can be, caring for their parents stops them in mid-flight.

But caring for aging family members encompasses others:

- A college student balances beginning her adult life with work and studies, while also filling in a generational gap to care for her grandparents.
- Sixty-two-year-old John is in a unique situation as caregiver for his brother and sister-in-law. While he has his own health issues and is a grandparent, John takes care of a childless

brother nearly twenty years older than he. Although a capable adult, he often has to work through the “little brother” mentality still held by his older brother, while trying to offer support and care.

- Singles are finding new ways to adjust their full lives to the needs of aging parents whether they are living nearby or across a continent.

Who belongs to this sister- and brotherhood of caregivers? Nearly everyone has a caregiving story to share. Perhaps a sibling has taken the lead role in giving care to a parent, or other relatives or friends step in when you just can't be the one to do it. Regardless of how active a role you take, you'll doubtless find yourself feeling like an unwilling participant at some point.

You may be the one sitting by watching it all happen, or you may be aiding the primary caregiver. But you'll be there in one way or another. Finding the right support for your situation is essential. And there is no method that works for everyone. Family dynamics, situations, and personalities, as well as sibling and parental relationships, all factor in.

“You just go through this and feel yourself moving along even if you don't know exactly where you're going. You have to do it step by step or day by day. You can't look at the long haul or try to predict the future,” Paula says.

“It's like I'm learning to drive a car with a manual transmission with no directions for learning how and when to shift,” says Terri.

Though this book is not a manual, there are tips that may make your situation less stressful. In the chapters that follow, look at the situations you may encounter as you take on caregiving responsibilities. There will be laughter, heartache, and cheers along the way. But most of all, you will find encouragement to look ahead and to place one foot in front of the other, knowing others understand and care.

As you read through this book, you'll find many of the following features in most of the chapters:

- **Sensitivity Alerts:** Issues that may be sensitive for those receiving care.
- **Reality Checks:** Issues that may not make sense but are part of the reality of your situation.
- **Through the Looking Glass:** First-person narratives from elders receiving care.
- **Viewpoints:** Narratives and aids to remind you that you're not alone.
- **Living Water:** Scriptural nourishment for maintaining a healthy perspective on caregiving (Candy is the author of all the Living Water segments).
- **MOPs (Medical Office Procedures):** Rules specific to doctor's offices.
- **Forms:** Forms you might find helpful (see chapter 23).

Viewpoint:

Life Changes—wife and mother of two

“My mother was picking my children up from school for me, helping me with them in the afternoons and even cooking dinner. She could do it all. Though she was beginning to have some health challenges, nothing prepared me for finding my mother lying on the floor after I got a call from my aunt that she couldn't be reached by phone. I arrived in Mama's driveway at the same time as E.M.S. In an instant, Mama's life changed, and so did mine,” Terri says.

Terri's mother had had a stroke while cooking breakfast. By the time Terri arrived, smoke was billowing out the door from still-cooking eggs. After a three-week hospital stay, Terri's mother came home. For months, her mother spent part of each day in her own home and part with Terri and her family. Terri managed two sets of finances, daily life for the family, and work. Eventually, they sold

both homes and bought a larger one. They lived full lives between the medical crises they faced.

As a paralegal, Terri was able to work out a flexible schedule with her boss. She keeps her cell phone on, answering calls from her mother when she's at work and answering calls from the office when she's taking her mother to appointments.

Though her brother is supportive, he lives three hours away.

When Terri tried to be away for a weekend, the worry she faced took away from the reprieve. And, in fact, she got the dreaded call. Her mother had fallen and broken a bone in her wrist. Racing home, Terri jumped back into her new role.

"It's like a child carrying a security blanket, and I'm that blanket. I always knew I'd take on this role, if needed. I saw my mother unselfishly care for her in-laws and how she made that work. I love her and wouldn't have this any other way, but that doesn't mean it isn't hard," she said.

Terri has had to tell her mother that her days behind the wheel of a car and using a skillet are over.

"It's hard to talk to my mother that way, but also hard for her to accept it," Terri says, admitting the role is not comfortable and guilt often creeps in.

Living Water

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;

I will counsel you and watch over you.

(Psalm 32:8)

For I am the LORD, your God,

who takes hold of your right hand

and says to you, Do not fear;

I will help you.

(Isaiah 41:13)

When you take those first tentative steps into caregiving, the tight-rope sways and threatens to flip you upside down. The parents you

previously went to for comfort, support, and wisdom are now leaning heavily on you, sometimes expecting more of you than you feel you can provide.

Thankfully, you don't have to navigate caregiving in your own strength. God provides a wealth of wisdom and resources to those who ask. He promises to take hold of our right hand, steady us, educate us, counsel us, and calm our fears, one day or perhaps even one minute at a time. While it's great to be organized and capable, we are at our best when we're leaning completely on God, trusting that He is our stability in this otherwise shaky endeavor. In realizing and accepting the mortality of our earthly fathers and mothers, we enter into a new and deeper relationship with our heavenly Father.

Take a moment right now to ask God to be your Abba, your Daddy, and provide balance, support, guidance, and peace in the days ahead.

Additional Information

Online resources:

AARP is a wonderful resource for issues affecting the over-50 age group. The AARP *Bulletin Today* is their regular publication that covers a multitude of related topics to help you understand senior living issues: <http://bulletin.aarp.org>.

Another helpful online resource, www.helpguide.org, has a separate section on seniors and aging.

Books:

Caring for Your Parents: The Complete Family Guide (AARP), Hugh Delehanty and Elinor Ginzler (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 2008).