

Me in the Middle? Survive the Sandwich Generation: Tips from a Professional Organizer



Caught between caring for ailing parents and raising children, 'overwhelmed and exhausted' pretty much sums up the sandwich generation. How do you cope?

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Overwhelmed and exhausted, pretty much sums up the sandwich generation caught between caring for ailing parents and raising children. Living it now, I take my hat off to anyone going through this process.

It started with my Dad being diagnosed with skin Cancer in about 2007. After surgeries and radiation, he never complained. My mother was able to look after him at their home on Harrison Lake where several generations of children and grandchildren enjoyed their summers sailing, swimming, and playing tennis. Unfortunately, the cancer began to spread but at least he was in his own home.

Then in 2008, we got word we were to adopt twin girls from China, after 3 long years waiting. Over the moon at the news, we shifted into overdrive with only 4 weeks to prepare for twins and our flight to China. Not only did we have to get two of absolutely everything but also, I was diagnosed with endometriosis and a cyst in my ovary, which would require surgery. My doctor did everything possible to get me through the medical system, so I could at least lift the twins when the twins got back. I will never forget the night when my husband realized he had to go to China on his own to get the twins. Having never really looked after a baby, he was nevertheless freaking out. To make matters worse, the adoption agency recommended going to China with 3 people for twins, so we were panicking.

Fortunately for everyone, his sister who had grown children, offered to fly into town and go with Chris to China. She was a Godsend to say the least; no words could thank her enough for her heroic offer. The two of them journeyed to China. They returned home after the big trip; his sister with pneumonia, my husband with bronchitis and the kids with eye infections and boils on their heads – all of which was minor in the grand scheme of things.

While my parents would have been there to help with the incredibly overwhelming task of caring for twins, my Mom needed to care for my Dad who kept beating cancer only to have it return in a new spot. Every weekend, we would trek to the lake to be with them. Let me say, it was a small feat packing up and travelling every weekend with 7 months old twins – massive move each time. I wouldn't have changed anything for a minute, but it took its toll.

Time blurred past and after 6 months I was unable to open a jar of baby food or pick up the twins as I developed "mother's wrist." This was the result of rocking the twins 4-5 times a day for 45 minutes each to get them to sleep – let's just call it inexperienced parenting. I remember counting how many times I lifted each twin a day; it was 72. I prayed for the twins to walk when everyone said on no you don't want that – but no, I really did because I couldn't lift them. My husband was amazing, but he needed to work, and I wasn't able to manage on my own. So, I packed up the twins and moved in with my Mom and Dad at the lake.

My mother quickly taught me to sleep train the twins, so it took minutes for them to go to sleep. My mother is amazing, if it is any indication of her saintly nature; she seriously offered to do in vitro for us at 70 years old. She would do anything for her family and friends.

Another memory I had was at night after we settled the kids down, I'd set up my Mom's two fish poaching pans – one with ice water and the other with hot water. I would alternate icing and heating each forearm to try to get the inflammation down.

I was able to help my mom look after my Dad. His cancer had come back, and they did another biopsy. Oddly, the place where they inserted the needle never healed but became an open wound that grew larger each day. The doctors said to be prepared in case it could hit his carotid artery, his passing would be imminent. I changed the bandages and syringed the wound with saltwater everyday to keep the infection out. People would say, "How did you do that?" I just did it – it's what you do. We were so busy looking after my Dad and the twins, there was no time to realize what was happening.

Despite all the tough times, the greatest gift I received was being with my Dad when he passed. I had prayed so hard for him to live but then I realized that wasn't fair. I stood over him with my hand on his chest and asked God to look after him. A moment later he took his last breath and I called my Mother. Miraculously, the wrinkles on his face melted away as my mother and I stood there with tears streaming down our face with our hands on his head saying how thankful we were that he wasn't in pain.

It wasn't until after my Dad passed that I realized how close I was with my Dad yet I could see the turmoil this stress had left behind. My Mom didn't want us to see her suffering or to worry about her, our garden was completely overgrown, and our life had been neglected. Life would never be the same. We all went back to put the pieces of our life back together. We needed to maintain Mom's house, so each time we visited there was a large to do list – replace the toilet, repair the deck, fix the dishwasher. It became a heavy burden on top of trying to look after the twins.

I very much believe; it was the stress of my father's cancer and being overwhelmed of being alone which triggered my Mom's Alzheimer's. My Mom's disease has been a very different compared to what happened with my Dad. It started in about 2010 when she started missing medications. She would feverishly deny it but the evidence was there. It was when my mom was to drive in from the lake to visit us, which is normally a 1.5-to-2-hour maximum drive, and it took 5 hours. She had gotten disoriented and lost. We convinced her to stop driving. She gave up her license and independence and ultimately, we had to sell her home. In that same year my husband, the twins and myself spent more time being sick than healthy. I calculated we were collectively sick 168 days out of 365 days that year. Stress definitely depleted your immunity.

One of the biggest burdens was orchestrating the downsizing my Mom's 5,000 square foot home on the lake. Even as a professional organizer who helps people with this all the time, it was one of the most difficult things we had to do. It was a massive project. Since Mom was ready for anything and anybody. If someone visited, she would have a pair of waterskies, bathing suit, snowsuit, goggles etc in their size at a moment's notice. Visitors would have left with a mini photo album from the weekend labeled with all the fun activities. My parents were very generous entertainers; having 17 people for the weekend was very common. As a result, there was a mountain of heirlooms, furniture, trinkets, letters, photo albums, books, clothes, sheets and which all had to be dealt with.

It was weekend after weekend purging, donating, and going through everything that had accumulated over 60 years. It was back breaking. Then I staged the home and we had to sell the house that meant so much to so many. It was exhausting and emotionally draining.

On the upside, my Mom fell in love for a 2nd time in her life. Her new man and her were able to enjoy time travelling, dancing, and caring for each other. They moved in together, however things were slipping after couple years. So my brother smartly started a dialogue around getting in home care. This wasn't popular at first but once established it was a blessing for everyone.

Unfortunately, even with all the best intentions it wasn't possible to care for her at home. The police found my Mom at 3 in morning having wandered very far from her home. She was taken to the hospital. I remember visiting her that night. They had given her too much medication and she was sitting in the hall with her eyes closed, confused, and continuously folding her robe. I was trying to talk with her all the while wanting to bawl my eyes out.

That night, I reached out on Facebook to ask for recommendations and help. My network was incredible. It was through friends and their experiences that we were able to find her a wonderful care facility. She has adapted magnificently to our surprise and delight. She dances almost wherever she goes, teaching staff how to dance and entertaining folks during sing-alongs. It is a huge weight off our shoulders to know she is well looked after despite the cost.

However, there is the different emotional cost. Every time I visit my Mom, I am hit by an intense sadness. Something will trigger a set of tears, which I try to hide. I am pretending it's all-ok. After all, my Mom is still with us, but in my heart she's not. I struggle with what to say and to stay cheerful. It's a sad but true phenomenon that when someone gets cancer everyone gathers around them however, when someone gets Alzheimer's there's not many around. So, I sent out an email update to family and friends inviting them to visit Mom.

I am adopted and am extremely attached to my Mom. I am terrified I will completely fall apart when she passes. I was at the doctor recently and asked how to manage this particular emotional aspect. I explained that each time I visit my mother I cry. My doctor asked me why. She reminded me that it is good to cry and is part of the process to grieving and eventually I will find acceptance. Its hard to believe but good to know. The worst part of this entire experience is not allowing my feelings to be felt. It's the pushing down of emotions and the pretending to be something I'm not that are so incredibly painful.

I am learning everyday how to cope with kids, self-employed and taking care of my Mom with the incredible support of my brother. We work as a team.

Tips to Survival

On behalf of Professional Organizers of Canada here are some tips to help anyone in the sandwich generation cope.

Support

- Know that you're not alone! The lifestyle of the sandwich generation is becoming increasingly common, so find other people in your position and help each other out.
- Plan carpools with your neighbours to get the kids to school and activities.
- Call or research how associations can help you, for example the Alzheimer Society of Canada.
- Organize an emergency contact list for yourself and your family to call for help in case something suddenly arises.
- If you have a more serious situation with an ailing parent, work as a team with your siblings and divide up duties that take advantage of skills and individual situations.
- As your children grow older, use this as a learning opportunity. Create meal schedules that are easy to follow and invite your children to help. If they are old enough to drive, encourage them to take their grandparents to the appointments. It will be a great chance to learn responsibility and bond with their grandparents.
- Replace "chores" with "life skills" and hire help when you can afford it.
- Hire a professional organizer to help downsize or set up systems for kids.

Release

- Often, being organized is simply letting things go
- Striving for spotless can really create internal stress.
- Look around for things that could be done less often. We've become incessantly clean, washing things after only a short time wearing them. If clothes aren't dirty, sweaty or stinky, you could give them a second go or instead of washing sheets weekly stretch it out to reduce laundry.
- Release domestic chores to hired help.

Schedule

- Get things on autopilot – if you need medications for ailing parents have the pharmacy prepare blister packs and have them delivered.
- Always schedule appointments, family time, medications and 'me time' to help you visually balance your life.
- Leverage technology by using apps like [Planner Pro](#) to sync all your calendars in one place, or apps like [Road Warrior](#) and [Route4Me](#) to plan the easiest route for errands.
- Combine family time with the basics such as eating breakfast or eating dinner.
- Be honest and stop volunteer work if it puts you over the edge, family comes first.
- Ask for flex time at work so you don't burn out.

Finances

- Invest the time to get your finances, your parent's finances, and your child's future in order, and be okay with seeking help from a financial planner or consultant that you trust.
- Have your advisor contact you regularly to review finances; you never know when you will suddenly need to adjust cash flow to take care of a parent.
- Teach your kids financial responsibility early. This essential life skill will help you, while it will also prepare them for the future.

Me Time

- Always schedule 'me time' at the end of every month.
- Let your family members know that the hour or two is special time for yourself to reflect and encourage them to do the same.
- With everything that you're dealing with, keeping yourself healthy is a necessity.
- Create your own care kit: book, healthy treats for doctor appointments and long waits

One last bit of advice laugh whenever you can; sometimes it's the only remedy.

Find a Professional Organizer near you by visiting www.organizersincanada.com.

About POC

Professional Organizers in Canada (POC) is a national registered non-profit association that provides education, business development tools and a code of ethics for all types of organizers across Canada. Currently representing over 500 Professional Organizers in more than 14 chapters nation-wide, POC's mandate is to provide a supportive environment for members to learn, share ideas, network, and exchange resources. POC also works to educate the public about the organizing industry and the benefits of working with a POC member.