

Coronavirus' Impact on Gen X Caregivers

They're being squeezed between the needs of their children and aging parents

by Ronda Kaysen



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For the past year, Jessica Johnson has been juggling caregiving responsibilities for her 12-year-old daughter, who suffers from mental illness, and her in-laws, who have chronic health conditions. Like many Gen Xers, this 45-year-old stay-at-home mother already felt squeezed by the competing needs of growing children and aging parents. Then the coronavirus pandemic plunged the country into virtual lockdown.

Now Johnson is sheltering at home in New Jersey with her husband and two daughters, and trying to figure out how to care for her in-laws in Texas; her mother-in-law is recovering from back surgery, and her father-in-law struggles to treat his diabetes and heart disease. "We're trying to hold it together," she says. "But it's really frightening."

While Americans scramble to stay safe and make sense of an uncertain landscape, Johnson and others like her find themselves in a challenging position, squeezed with caregiving responsibilities on both sides. Gen Xers — Americans born between 1965 and 1980 — are already more likely to be caregivers than those who belong to other generations. The average caregiver of an older adult is a 49-year-old working woman who provides 20 hours of unpaid work each week in caring for her mother, according to the Family Caregiver Alliance. With the average age of motherhood rising, women in their late 40s and early 50s are more likely to have children still at home. Add coronavirus to the mix, and the stresses mount.

"It's the perfect storm," says Ada Calhoun, author of *Why We Can't Sleep: Women's New Midlife Crisis*. "We are taking care of kids who are homeschooling while we're working, if we can, and while our parents are in the crosshairs of this disease."

We're worried about everybody

Johnson's 12-year-old has been hospitalized three times in the past year and is exceptionally sensitive to the stresses of the pandemic. Her therapy sessions have moved online, and other interventions have been suspended because of the shutdowns of nonessential services. At the same time, Johnson has had to coordinate health care for her in-laws from afar, a job she or her husband normally would have done by flying to Texas to help.

"We're worried about everybody," Johnson says. "We're in and out of crisis with our daughter. There is no one we can talk to; we have to keep it to ourselves."

Johnson and her husband find stress relief by cycling, hiking and taking long walks. "Exercise for us is our main outlet," she says, and since they can't confide in many friends, they rely on each other for emotional support.

Caregivers experience high levels of depression and anxiety and are more likely to have chronic illnesses than others, according to the Family Caregiver Alliance. But there are advantages, too. Taking care of a loved one can provide a sense of purpose and well-being, and the relationships are often symbiotic. For example, a grandparent may need help managing health care but in turn provides child care support for working parents.

But that support may now vanish, as older Americans are concerned about the health risks associated with interacting with their grandchildren in person. In some cases, an aging parent may need extra care from family as nurses and paid aides are not able to make in-home visits.

A new cohort of caregivers

"COVID-19 is creating a new cohort of people who are identifying themselves as caregivers for the first time because it's creating a need that hadn't been there," says Ann Steffen, a professor of clinical psychology at the University of Missouri-St. Louis who specializes in older adults and behavioral medicine. "Role changes, especially when they happen very suddenly, take people by surprise."

Until a few weeks ago, Lindsay Terry's 78-year-old mother in Davis, California, would pick up Terry's 10-year-old son from school and take him to Starbucks. Despite her chronic respiratory issues, Terry's mother did not need significant support, and neither did her 84-year-old father, who has diabetes. But now they're housebound.

Terry, 44, a fifth-grade teacher for a virtual independent study charter school, brings her parents groceries, leaving the packages outside. Her husband, Brad Terry, 47, works at a grocery store, and her 17-year-old daughter still works at a coffee shop in town, also increasing the family's risk of exposure.

"I'm not that worried about the people in this house getting sick because we're healthy, we're strong, we've gotten nasty flus before," says Terry. But if members of the household do contract the virus, "who's going to bring stuff to my parents? Who's going to make sure they're OK?"

In a matter of days, Terry's relationship with her parents changed. Now her mother calls every day asking if anyone in the house is sick. Terry has had to argue with her father to stay indoors, struggling to convince him of the risk. She worries about the emotional well-being of her children and her students, who are all tele-schooling, and her son misses the time he used to spend with his grandmother. "I'm feeling an enormous amount of pressure to help other people," Terry says. "I feel that as a heavy burden."

Terry has enjoyed one upside to the new household arrangement: Her older daughter, 19, is home from college because of the coronavirus. "It's nice having my oldest home," Terry says. "Partially because I miss her, and partially because it's kind of like having another adult in the house."

How to cope

People who are caring for others can take steps to manage the stress.

1. Take an inventory of your resources. In high-stress situations, we kick into survival mode. Ann Steffen, a clinical psychology professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, recommends stepping back and taking stock of the emotional resources you have at your disposal. Whom can you call for support? Who might be able to pick up

items from the store for you? Think back to other crises in your past, try to recall what resources you drew on that helped you through that time and write them down.

2. Take time for yourself. Days may feel chaotic, but make time to exercise and talk to friends. Carve out a few moments in your day for a favorite hobby, like reading, drawing or baking. Even a long shower or bath can help calm frayed nerves.

3. Draw on your strengths. Author Ada Calhoun points out that Gen Xers are already equipped for challenging environments. As a generation that went through adolescence during the AIDS epidemic, entered adulthood during a major recession, and today has high levels of debt, Gen Xers are accustomed to weathering hard times. “We are used to tragedy and to feelings of helplessness and to watching a lot of television,” Calhoun says. Now, “we get to exercise all those muscles.”

4. Draw on the strengths of your parents. They may need more support right now, but they also have the benefit of perspective, having lived through the Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis and other frightening, stressful periods in U.S. history. “The older someone gets, the better they get at managing their relationships and stressful experiences,” Steffen says. “Older adults have that wisdom and that ability to call upon past successful coping mechanisms.”