

# LIVE WELL

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## GENERATION SUPERWOMAN

Are you part of the sandwich generation? Caring for both your children and your parents can feel overwhelming, so we've asked the experts for their advice 🍷

WORDS | *Claire Munnings*







**M**ars Webb (52) is used to having numerous demands on her time. For the 12 years preceding her mum's death this June, the PR consultant was simultaneously caring for her mum who was suffering from dementia, looking after her three kids and supporting her dad through the situation – all while setting up and running her own business. “It’s been a challenge,” she admits. “I work a full-time job and at the height of it I was trying to maintain a new business while living in Belfast and visiting clients in places like London and the Channel



**1 in 5**

people aged 50-64 in the UK are carers to an older family member

[carersuk.org](http://carersuk.org)



Islands.” On top of that, there were new school starts to navigate, a house move to organise and general family life to keep on top of. “Sometimes it did feel very overwhelming as my dad left me to do everything organisational with my mum’s care – so there were occasions when I was working away and my phone would ring.” Mars’ situation isn’t particularly unusual. She’s part of what’s become known as the sandwich generation – the group of people who are ‘caught in the middle’ of caring for both their young children and their ageing parents.

### SANDWICHED IN

“At this time, women are essentially sandwiched in between high emotional, practical and social demands,” explains Dr Meg Arroll, a chartered psychologist who works with wellbeing brand Healthspan ([drmegarroll.com](http://drmegarroll.com)). “This generally happens at a time when careers are in full stride and perimenopause or menopause symptoms start to disrupt a woman’s life – meaning that females within the sandwich generation have an awful lot on their plates.” It’s little wonder then that a recent study found that mothers in the sandwich generation, aged between 35 and 54, feel more stress than any other age group. And, while we can all cope with some strain, problems can arise when these demands become too much. “The stress of juggling a number of people who are reliant on you can inevitably lead to exhaustion, feeling guilty and not putting your own self-care needs first,” explains Puja McClymont, a qualified life coach, NLP practitioner and the producer and presenter of the Self-Care 101 podcast ([pujamcclymont.com](http://pujamcclymont.com)). “It’s understandable that you want to care for your parents and your children but without prioritising your needs too, you will burn out and may even start to resent the people you love and care for.”



### PRIORITISING YOU

Taking time to focus on yourself is something that all the experts recommend, and while it may sound impossible – it’s essential for your wellbeing. “You will most likely have to learn to accept help from others to make this happen and this can be challenging emotionally as you may feel that you ‘should’ be able to care for all your loved ones,” says Dr Meg. “However,

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you really can’t drink from an empty cup, and nor can you nurture others if you’re completely spent.” While Mars says she’s found the past few years incredibly tough, she’s also glad that she knows she did everything she could for her mum. And there are things to take from that time too. “Mum’s dementia taught my kids compassion, and showed how important kindness and a sense of humour are,” she says. “We all got through it together and we had many funny moments with mum too. At times it was full on, but I felt so lucky to have dad, our carers, and a husband who is incredibly supportive and kind.” The key, it seems, is to take each moment as it comes – and to be organised with your time when possible. “Overall, planning is essential,” concludes Puja. “Don’t just leave the ‘new normal’ to chance and let things fall into place, as that’s a definite way to burn out. Instead, cultivate organisational skills and make your new landscape as comfortable as you can so that you can look after yourself, others and still enjoy living your life.”



## JUGGLING ACT

### TOP TIPS ON HOW TO MANAGE MULTIPLE COMMITMENTS

#### Look at your routine

"Once you realise that you're going to be supporting your parents, I highly recommend reorganising your life and your routine," advises Puja. "This may be a big adjustment so if you can gain control of the situation as soon as possible, you'll be able to recognise when you're doing too much and pull back more easily."

#### Prioritise self-care

"Set firm boundaries, not just with others but yourself too," recommends Dr Meg. "Boundaries are the ultimate form of self-care and absolutely necessary to avoid emotional and physical burnout." Puja suggests creating a list of non-negotiables that you want to do each day or week, such as enjoying family time with the kids on a Saturday.

#### Reflect on your relationships

Navigating the new dynamic that caring for your parents can create is a particularly difficult part of being 'sandwiched'. "You may want to begin a new type of relationship with your parent, while remembering that the present does not override the past," Dr Meg advises. "Also, know that it's OK to grieve for the living, which is sometimes called ambiguous grief."



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#### Join a support network

"Speak to others who are in the same boat," suggests Dr Meg. "Being a carer to one's parents can feel isolating but it's relatively common. Reach out to groups or individuals who are also looking after loved ones as this can reduce feelings of loneliness. It's much easier now with online groups but find ones that are moderated as emotions can run high."

#### Know when you need help yourself

As well as accepting help with your caring duties, it's also important to understand when you need some form of aid yourself. "When your focus is on others, it can be hard to recognise that we need support ourselves. If you start to experience

## SUPPORT LINES

### UNDERSTAND WHAT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE

There are numerous support packages available through the NHS and various charities which can be useful when caring for your parents. In Mars' situation, carers were her lifeline. "We had carers in four times a day and I can't speak highly enough of them," she says. "My advice is to get help where you can and organise respite care if possible, too."

**Carers UK: 020 7378 4999**

**Age UK: 0800 678 1602**



symptoms of chronic stress, such as irritability, tearfulness, the inability to concentrate or sleep troubles, it's time to shore-up your supports," says Dr Meg.

#### Don't be afraid to talk to others

Don't forget to talk to your employer too, and see what help they may be able to offer in terms of compassionate leave or flexible working options. Extra financial support may be available to you as well – charities such as Alzheimer's Society can usually offer advice on topics such as this.

#### Be kind to yourself

"Above all, be kind to yourself," concludes Dr Meg. "We're far too critical of ourselves, particularly when it comes to looking after loved ones. Break a negative thought pattern either by reaching out for a chat with another carer or by using relaxation, distraction or mindfulness techniques." **HOW**