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*From the Baltimore Sun*

**The Middle Ages**

## Stress clamps down on the sandwich generation

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Aging can be a scary process for Baby Boomers.

But aging while also raising children, preparing for retirement, staying healthy and tending to an elderly loved one can be an unexpected and overwhelming nightmare.

It doesn't have to be quite so frightening, though. Not according to Marion Somers, a nationally-recognized geriatric care specialist and author of recently published *Elder Care Made Easier: Doctor Marion's 10 Steps to Help You Care for an Aging Loved One*. From creating better communication skills to navigating complicated financial issues, Somers covers a wide range of topics that can help individuals become quasi-experts on caregiving while also including several suggestions on how to prevent such duties from taking its toll on families.

Recently, Somers spoke by phone to discuss what is bound to be a top concern for 75 million boomers -- stressed adults who are sandwiched between raising children and providing support to aging parents.

**You've been working with patients and the elderly for 35 years. What made you decide to put what you call common-sense practices all into one place for caregivers?**

I went through the various bookstores and saw that there were a variety of books that were there to help caregivers. The information was there, but you had to plow through 300 to 400 pages to get to the nuggets of information. Someone busy and under stress doesn't have time to go through all that to get the bits of information they need. They're working full-time, they're taking care of kids, they're taking care of an older person, and they're frayed at the edges.

I wanted to write a comprehensive but very thin book (it's 166 pages from intro to index) that you could carry in your briefcase or purse. I wrote it not in chapters, but steps. An individual can go to just the one step they need and zero in on the one emergency and move on.

**The AARP estimated that there are 34 million caregivers dealing with adults and seniors in 2006 and that 41 percent take a leave of absence to do so. One-third eventually give up work entirely. Those numbers are huge, and yet why is it that many people are still fairly unprepared when it's their turn to deal with what**

**seems like a growing issue for Americans?**

It's straight and simple: They don't realize they're caregivers. They just see it as new responsibilities. They start balancing the checkbook for an elderly loved one, for instance. Then, maybe, grandma can't do laundry anymore so they stop by once a week to help out. Before you know it, that person is putting in 16 hours a week with some of those extra responsibilities. That's not just help[ing] out. That's a part-time job. If they have kids, they're juggling that time with their family, and then they're giving up their social life. Before you know it, the caregiver gives up their whole life.

**Is there anything that caregivers aren't prepared for when taking on such responsibilities?**

They're surprised by how it crept up on them. I've heard that so many times.

**We hear about how hard it is on the elderly, but caregivers need to safeguard their own health and mental well-being, too, right?**

If the caregiver falls apart, the whole thing falls apart. Think of sitting on a plane when the flight attendant is telling you that in case of an emergency, you should put the oxygen mask on first and then take care of the child and the older person in need. The same advice can be used for caregivers. When the caregiver falls apart mentally and emotionally, they stop going to the gym, they stop going out with friends, they lose their social support. Then their body falls apart because they're no longer taking care of it. They need to take care of themselves.

**Caring for an elderly person can be very expensive. What do you think of the growing push to buy long-term care insurance?**

If people can afford it, I say do it. I've known people who buy it for themselves or for their parents. It's a very expensive proposition, though -- \$3,000 to \$4,000 a year. But if you knew that a week in assisted living will cost that much, you look at it very differently. It's not a quick fix, even if you buy it. .

**There were a lot of day-to-day, practical tips you provided to nurture your elderly loved one's soul. Why is it so important to get them talking, reminiscing or just out-and-about?**

The first step in my book is about communicating. A lot of caregivers go in like gangbusters, cleaning out the refrigerator, tossing out the trash. I say, start by communicating. Tell your loved one, "I'm so concerned about you. It's affecting my health, my marriage, my work." Without communicating, they don't know what the older person is thinking, feeling or fearful of.

**When do you know it's time to get outside help?**

Hopefully, before you fall apart. Caregivers are falling apart left and right. They don't know to scream and say, "I can't do this anymore!" They may be superstars at work, but they might be ashamed that they can't take care of their own mother. Just from the social responsibility and failure aspect, some don't want to talk about it at work because they don't want their boss to think they're not a competent person.

Warning signs might be they've let their social life go. They've let their exercise go. They might take out a quick meal instead of cooking a healthy meal. Their sleep pattern goes out of whack; they only want to sleep, or they can't sleep at all.

**You've spent a lot of time caring for other people's loved ones and helped many families deal with the death of their loved ones. You wrote a little bit about losing your younger sister to cancer recently. Were you surprised by how much harder is it to be a caregiver to your own loved one?**

It's terrible. It's wrenching. I'm in the business so I wanted to fix it, her cancer. But she was terminal. When she passed on, for the first three weeks, I didn't cry. In the fourth week, I was driving my car and I thought, "Marion, you handled yourself well." I took care of everything. But while I was congratulating myself for being able to

help everyone in the family, all of a sudden, tears started coming out of my eyes like Niagara Falls. I had to pull over and I had to cry for about 45 minutes. That was a real surprise to me. She lived longer than expected, but she still died.

**If there's a piece of wisdom that you'd like people to take away with them about caring for the elderly, what would it be?**

Stay alert. If they are caregivers at a distance, make sure someone is physically with the person, because they may put on a good act on the phone, but they may be falling apart physically. And take care of yourself. The caregiver must take good care of themselves.

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