

Dual Responsibilities: Work and Eldercare, Part I

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Employees who are providing care or overseeing care for aging parents have a difficult task in remaining productive at work and effective in their personal lives. While the personal demands placed upon employees often increase as their parents age, the amount of time available to meet those demands remains the same. It is at this intersection that many workers begin to feel high levels of stress. Along with the impact of increased personal stress there are important financial considerations for the workplace. A 1999 study by Metropolitan Life Insurance estimates workplace losses at **11-29 billion dollars** per year in the US due to employee absenteeism, lack of productivity and turnover rates as employees attempt to care for their aging parents.

Family conflict, financial worries and unclear options for care-giving present emotional stress for employees and their families. Take "Michelle" for example: Michelle is a 43 year old supervisor. She is married and has a son in high school. During a recent staff meeting she was interrupted by a phone call from her mother's physician in Boston. Due to a fall the previous night, her mother's hip was fractured and would need immediate surgery. Rehabilitation would require 2-3 months of physical therapy in a nursing facility in Boston. The physician noted that Michelle's mother repeatedly states, "I can't afford all of this," and worries that "there is no one to take care of my dog." Michelle's two brothers, who live in Boston, have expressed little interest in their mother and are "checked out," according to Michelle.

Supervising a work group of 25 employees in an ever-changing department, Michelle feels overwhelmed much of the time. And, now, "this." After her return from Boston, Michelle began to spend increased amounts of work time on the telephone trying to manage her mother's care. She used sick leave twice in two weeks due to severe headaches and wonders if she will need to quit her job in order to care for her mother.

While quitting work is one approach to managing multiple personal and work responsibilities; it is often not the best answer. *There are ways to manage both work and eldercare responsibilities.*

Michelle might begin by sharing responsibilities. Even though she considers her siblings to have little interest in their mother, that may be inaccurate. Michelle should call her siblings and discuss the current situation. It is possible that her siblings are very interested in their mother's care and that Michelle has misinterpreted their lack of communication. It may be that Michelle's siblings are truly not interested in assisting with their mother's care. In either case, it will be a *critical first step for Michelle to understand what family resources may be available to help with her mother's care.*

If her siblings are willing to assist with care, Michelle can ask each sibling what role they are most comfortable/able to provide. Michelle's older brother may be in a position to visit mom in the hospital and help with bringing personal belongings to the nursing home or rehabilitation center where their mother will begin recovery. Michelle's younger brother may help by visiting mom, consulting with her physicians and talking with her about changes needed for her return home. Perhaps Michelle can arrange a visit to spend time with her mother and begin conversations around future care needs, financial implications and desires her mother may have around those issues. Everyone should provide emotional support to Michelle's mother. This event may mark a significant change in her formerly independent lifestyle and may create fear and confusion around the future.

It will be important for Michelle *to begin building community resources.* (This becomes even more critical if her siblings are unwilling to assist with care.) She should search for Boston area agencies that support families with eldercare issues and contact them as soon as possible. If her mother has neighbors or

other friends who have offered assistance; now is the time to enlist their help. A neighbor might be willing to care for her mother's dog, pick up her mail or make sure plants are watered.

Another option for families who provide long-distance care is to hire eldercare managers who help with arranging and monitoring parents' needs. These services can be expensive, but provide the family caregiver with a built-in community resource as well as assistance with placement of in-home or out-of-home services and the necessary monitoring of those services. Eldercare managers can provide invaluable piece-of-mind for distant family members.

After one phone call, Michelle suddenly joined the group of 14 million employed caregivers currently providing care, or overseeing care, for their elderly parents. She learned that managing care at a distance is difficult but with some assistance it could be done. Now, if Michelle is asked for advice she tells her coworkers, "do not wait until there is a crisis to make a plan." "Make a plan now for what you and other family members will do if your parent's have a need for more assistance with daily living." Taking Michelle's advice, we will consider what is needed in planning for a parent's care in Part II of *Dual Responsibilities: Work and Eldercare*.

The Colorado State Employee Assistance Program is now offering a class which provides information and resources around planning for, or currently providing, eldercare while working. Consider scheduling a class for your work group or yourself.

Dual Responsibilities: Eldercare and Work

Call: The Colorado State Employee Assistance Program: **303-866-4314**
to schedule a class.