

WORK & FAMILY

By SUE SHELLENBARGER



Parental Pull: How to Prepare For an Elder-Care Emergency

With the population of frail, aged people in need of daily care set to rise nearly 40% in the next decade, more employees will face what seems like a problem with no solution: Planning for the unplannable.

While child-care problems get more attention in the workplace, the emergencies that beset the aged -- a fall, a stroke, the errant behavior of dementia -- tend to be more disruptive, forcing working caregivers to drop everything and rush to the scene. But how do you lay the groundwork at work for a crisis you can't foresee? From consultants, coaches and caregivers, here are some ideas:

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED



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Sue Shellenbarger [answers readers' questions](#)² about part-time MBA programs in New York and employers for people with disabilities.

Work as if you're leaving tomorrow for vacation. "Get your backlog as close to zero as you can, and keep it there," says David Allen, a productivity coach.

Create an understandable system to track projects and documents. Rick Brenner, a Cambridge, Mass., consultant, advises entering in your calendar details and contacts for at least the next five workdays' tasks, with related files nearby. This will help co-workers pick up the ball.

While caring for her late parents, Diana Abouchar, Northbrook, Ill., made a habit of working long hours and finishing projects promptly. When a crisis called her away, she says, "I left no trace" of undone work.

Marshal your resources. Research your employer's time-off policies and federal and state laws. The federal Family and Medical Leave Act allows covered workers up to 12 unpaid weeks off, but may not protect your job if you're a highly paid "key employee." Work with your boss on a time-off plan. And fortify relationships with human-resource managers, Mr. Brenner says; "they're the ones who are going to bend the policy for you, and you're surely going to need the policy bent." With co-workers, make deposits in what Rich Gee, a Stamford, Conn., executive career coach, calls "your goodwill savings account: good deeds, rescues in emergencies, over-the-top performance, come-in-early and stay late, a can-do attitude."

SUPPORT SERVICES

Here are some resources for elder care:

- [Caregiver.org](#)³ -- research, guide to programs.
- [Caremanager.org](#)⁴ -- help in finding a geriatric care manager.
- [caregiving.org](#)⁵ -- advocacy, research.
- [nfcacares.org](#)⁶ -- support, networking tools.

If you're a perfectionist, this is a good time to get over it. A self-described "recovering control freak," Carol DeGraw, a manager at a Morristown, N.J., nonprofit, spent months planning every detail of a luncheon for 200 people.

Then, her mother needed cancer surgery right before the luncheon.

"I felt so bad" about letting go, Ms. DeGraw says. Mindful of her priorities, however, she cared for her mom and asked a co-worker to deliver a speech in her place. The co-worker not only did well, but spoke of Ms. DeGraw's caregiving so positively during her own speech that "people are still talking about it," Ms. DeGraw says; it was a lesson "that trying to control everything is probably not the best way to go through life."

Gather medical information. Kathy Raborn, a Pennington, N.J., manager, readied brief summaries of her parents' emergency contacts, insurance plans, medications and medical history. She was glad she had when, just 20 minutes before making a major presentation to her bosses, she got a call from her mother, distraught and confused, saying Ms. Raborn's father had fallen and was en route by ambulance to a hospital 30 minutes away. After making sure her dad's injury was minor, Ms. Raborn faxed the summary to doctors, enabling them to treat him immediately -- and enabling her to make her presentation before rushing to the hospital to comfort him.

Make peace with your limits. Even the savviest manager can feel conflicted over elder care. Mr. Allen is perhaps the nation's best-known productivity consultant; his book, "Getting Things Done," has sold one million copies. But after moving his late mother to a nursing home near his Ojai, Calif., office, even Mr. Allen had trouble drawing boundaries.

"Trying to define the edge" of an elder-care commitment can be hard, he says. "When can I drive by that nursing home and not go in, because I need to take care of myself?" he recalls thinking, chiding himself, "come on, David." In time, he says, he came to peace with the commitment he was humanly able to make.

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