

## Podcast Transcript: Who's Caring for the Caregiver in the Middle of the Triple Decker Sandwich

**Barry:** Welcome to Senior Care Corner. I'm Barry.

**Kathy:** And I'm Kathy. Thanks for joining us!

**Barry:** You'll find us online at SeniorCareCorner.com with solutions, tools and information for families, caregivers and others who care for and about senior adults. And of course as we keep saying, you'll find us on Facebook as well.

We've got another information filled episode planned for you today. In our feature segment, we're going to be talking some more about something we've been addressing in some of our blog posts, caring for the one in the middle of a triple decker sandwich. Before we get to that, Kathy you've got some great news items lined up for us I see?

**Kathy:** Indeed I do! Our first news item today is:

### Aging Adults Flock to Facebook

Statistics now show that one in five seniors are using social media specifically Facebook. The number senior of users has tripled.

The senior's using Facebook approximately one hour per session according to the studies.

Women are the largest users but men are joining more recently in larger numbers.

Connecting to family and friends especially over long distance has contributed to the interest in Facebook. It has been reported that the use of Facebook has reduced isolation many seniors feel when family members are far away or too busy to be with them as much as they would like.

One senior states: "I've been using Facebook for about two years and I have found that it has improved my quality of life during my senior years. I can't imagine my life without it!"

Using Facebook and other social media can help seniors stay mentally engaged as well as mentally sharp by learning new skills such as posting a picture.

Statistics of seniors who currently use Facebook:

- 40 percent use it to connect with family and old friends
- 30 percent use it for photo sharing
- 20 percent use it for gaming
- 10 percent use it for contests or other promotions they may find

Barry, it's very interesting that this article points out what we have been reporting in our posts and podcasts about social media. We as caregivers need to encourage and facilitate our seniors to engage in all forms of social media. There are numerous benefits beyond just the family connection but also keeping them mentally stimulated and not feeling isolated.

**Barry:** Well clearly there are more seniors taking advantage of it, and hopefully we can encourage more to do that because I think you've just kind of scratched the surface on some of the benefits they're going to see.

**Kathy:** Definitely. Alright our second news item today:

#### Benefit Center Helps Seniors Access Missing Benefits

The national Council on Aging has reported that almost 47% of Medicare beneficiaries are eligible for benefits and don't know it.

To help seniors learn about which benefits they are entitled, the WISE & Healthy Benefits Enrollment Center was established in Los Angeles County to serve as a one stop source to get assistance in applying for health care, prescription drugs, food, and utilities expenses benefits.

This one of a kind Benefits Enrollment Center is the result of a grant from the National Council on Aging. It provides help free of charge to resident's over 50 years old.

Online tools are used to find benefit programs such as Medicare Part D Extra Help, Medicare Savings Programs, Part B premiums, Medi-Cal (assistance with medications and medical bills program), Cal-Fresh (assistance with food costs) and Low-Income Home Energy Assistance for heating and cooling bills (LIHEAP).

The Enrollment Center will assist seniors in filling out applications, gathering any documents that they need and submitting of the necessary paperwork to receive their entitled benefits.

If you senior lives in California, we will include the contact information to this Enrollment Center in our show notes. However, this resource is available to you across the nation as well, even if you don't live in California.

If your senior lives outside of California they can get connected to their benefits through the National Council on Aging's BenefitsCheckUP program. This is an online service that helps seniors learn about benefits they may not be taking advantage but they currently are qualified for no matter where they live. It is an online tool, as we said, that contains public and private programs for all Medicare recipients. We will include that information in the show notes today as well.

**Barry:** That's great information Kathy. Let's make sure that everybody gets the benefits to which they are entitled.

**Kathy:** Absolutely. Alright, our third news story today:

#### Screening by Primary Care Doctors May Spot Dementia

A new study reveals that there was an increase of two- to three-fold in the diagnoses of brain function impairments such as dementia following a routine screenings in their primary care clinics.

More than 8,000 US veterans over 70 years of age agreed to a routine screening for brain function impairments at the VA primary care clinic. None were felt to have any overt signs of memory loss prior to their screening.

2,081 or 26% of those who were tested failed the screening. 28% of those who failed agreed to further testing. Of those tested, 93% had brain-function impairment, 75% with diagnosed dementia.

A brain function impairment or cognitive impairment can lead to a reduction in memory, learning and thinking in addition to that expected within our normal aging.

This study was published recently in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society. Researchers urged primary care providers to perform routine screening in an attempt to improve care and contain costs of dementia.

However, it should be noted that several groups such as the Alzheimer's Association and the American College of Physicians do not recommend screening on all older patients just those that express a concern about a specific problem potentially related to dementia.

**Barry:** It's interesting what you might find when you're out there looking.

**Kathy:** Right. But what we do know is that doctors aren't screening for this routinely. They are waiting for us as caregivers or seniors to come out and say "I think I have a problem." By then, often times it's too late.

Alright, our final news item today:

#### Injured Boomers Beware: Know When to See Your Doctor

When a pop, strain or suddenly swollen joint reminds an active older adult that they aren't as young as they think, you must decide if your injury needs medical attention.

Aging bodies are not as nimble as young ones and can be prone to more minor damage which can become more serious if ignored or even denied.

While knee replacement surgeries have tripled in boomers, we are learning that as many as 1 in 20 seniors have artificial joints; seniors can avoid that if they properly manage aches and pains.

Some injuries require immediate treatment. They generally are considered excruciating, unrelenting pain that causes your senior to stop an activity or prevents normal movement. As an example would be a knee that won't hold you up or collapses when you stand or a bent elbow that won't straighten.

A good rule of thumb according to a sports medicine specialist at Chicago's Rush University Medical Center, Dr. Charles Bush-Joseph says "if you can bear weight on it, it is safe to self-treat". What happens in a few days is important however. If pain increases or swelling doesn't subside, it's time to see a doctor.

Common injuries seniors can self-treat include tendonitis, back pain, or arthritis. Overdoing activity can aggravate these minor injuries. The doctor's advice is "listen to your body". If you ignore an injury it can lead to a longer recovery.

**Barry:** Very interesting. That's something of value not just for seniors but also family members.

**Kathy:** That's true.

**Barry:** Well thanks for some very informative news items there Kathy.

**Kathy:** You're welcome.

**Barry:** Now it's time for our feature segment.

There has been much discussion and we've received a lot of feedback from our earlier posts on the topic of the Middle of the Triple Decker Sandwich. Bruce Sallan, a friend of ours who has a famous blog of his own invited me to host the topic on DadChat, his weekly twitter chat, and we had a good discussion there. With so much interest and clearly so many people to whom it applies, we decided to take this topic deeper into caring for that person in the middle; whether it is you or someone you love.

First, maybe we better explain what we mean by "middle of a triple decker sandwich." We often hear of the sandwich generation, people say that referring to many boomers who are caring for both their children and aging parents or grandparents. We get calling it "sandwich" which emphasizes those receiving care, but in our thinking that is exactly the limitation of the label – it ignores the needs of the ones in the middle actually giving the care. We hope that by getting people to think of it as a triple decker sandwich we can put some focus on that person in the middle.

It takes commitment to be either a good parent or a good caregiver of a senior loved one. Many family caregivers find themselves putting their own lives and needs on hold to address the sometimes overwhelming demands of caring for both. Nobody in any of the layers of the triple decker sandwich benefits when the caregiver in the middle ignores his or her own needs to tend to those of others. Unfortunately, the needs of the caregiver often come last, which too often means they're not addressed at all. I mean there is only so much time in the day.

**Kathy:** That's true Barry. But putting their own needs aside for too long is thought to be driving the many reports of depression and chronic diseases related to stress among caregivers in the boomer age group. It doesn't take a research report, though, for us to understand how that can happen. Simply being a parent OR caregiver of a senior loved one can result in high levels of stress, particularly if you are also balancing other commitments, such as a job, your home and the needs of other family members.

**Barry:** Well Kathy, certainly the economy of the last few years has only heightened the issues, with more children returning to the nest at the same time many of our senior loved ones have seen strains from retirement savings withering – not to mention financial strains from job losses and lower property values for caregivers themselves.

Yes, caregivers need care too.

**Kathy:** Definitely we do. Unfortunately, somewhere in our upbringing we have learned to think that we are being selfish when we tend to our own needs instead of focusing totally on the needs of others in our care. It's true that caregivers are often times fixers. They want to fix others but not themselves. Caregivers need to realize that the opposite is true because caring for ourselves improves our own wellbeing, which in turn makes us better caregivers to our children and senior loved ones. We're going to talk more today about how to do that.

**Barry:** In addition, we're going to discuss that it shouldn't be just the caregiver responsible for meeting his or her own needs. Often seniors under the care of a family caregiver have additional family members and other loved ones, though maybe for many reasons they're not in a position to fill the same role as the primary caregiver. However, those loved ones can still play a meaningful role, even if they live some distance away.

**Kathy:** So as a caregiver, you want to be your own caregiver too. Caring for the middle of this triple decker sandwich starts with recognizing that you are important and your needs are just that – things that need to be met. In other words, if you are in the middle you need to start thinking of yourself as YOUR own caregiver, too.

A first step in the process is find a way to take some time for yourself – it doesn't need to be much time, and we all know we don't have very much anyway – and do an honest assessment of your needs. You already do that as part of caring for your children and senior loved ones; now it's time to take the focus to yourself.

**Barry:** And really when you're doing that you're looking at the aspects of your life that are important to your wellbeing, emotionally or otherwise? Here are some examples of what we're saying.

- Do you have a relationship with a spouse, partner or friend that is important to your life, someone on whom you lean and who helps make your life complete? What is needed on your part to keep that relationship healthy? Far too many family caregivers find themselves straining or even breaking important relationships when they focus themselves on the loved ones for whom they are caring.
- Are you employed in a job that provides needed income to support your life and family, and which may provide some fulfillment to you as well? Being a family caregiver can impact the focus and time one gives that job, often impacting the quality of work done on the job. Even understanding and caring employers may find this difficult, especially where the economic turndown has resulted in thinner staffing levels and greater expectations of all.
- Looking at how you spend your time: is there a hobby, sport or some other activity that you enjoy and that lets you get away for a while? These are often the first things a family caregiver will push aside under the pressures that come with being in the middle of the sandwich, as the benefits they bring are sometimes underappreciated until it's already too late and we've already ignored them.

**Kathy:** That's often true. Okay, you've made your assessment and confirmed those aspects of your life that are important to your own wellbeing. What's next? Well, that's really up to you.

The lists different caregivers make will be as individual as are they – and likewise the follow up steps and action plan from your assessment. Only you know what it will take to give proper care and feeding to those parts of your life that are important.

You should consider planning to meet your own needs, though, the same way you think about what is needed to meet the needs of the others for whom you care.

Once you've gotten out of the habit of addressing your own needs it may be hard to get the habit started again, especially if nobody is vocal about those needs the way your children or senior loved ones often let you know as soon as they want your attention or some action on your part. Some find it helpful to set up appointments for themselves on their own calendars, either a slice of time daily to address those needs you identified or even a day periodically when you focus fully on what is important to you and taking care of yourself.

**Barry:** And Kathy maybe this a good point for me to interject something that I always seem to bring up. Are there ways that technology can be used to lighten your caregivers load? Yes, there may be an app for that, as we discussed in a recent podcast. As we learned at the Consumer Electronics Show, there are a number of devices and programs that are designed to address some of the needs that may take a good chunk of your time as a caregiver.

A key is to give yourself permission, though, to address your own needs rather than feeling guilty that you're not thinking first of those under your care at all times. After all, your ability to stay healthy – both physically and mentally – is very important to those whom you are a caregiver.

How do you get that time to focus on your own needs, especially days off from time to time, or even days simply away if not off? Many areas have agencies that provide help, whether it is adult daycare, volunteer fill-in caregivers or other respite solutions. This is also where other family members or close friends can play a role.

Don't be afraid to ask others for help!

**Kathy:** Certainly don't be afraid. You deserve the help.

**Barry:** Now let's talk for a minute about the role of other family members. Really again, you don't have to do it all yourself. And if you're the one listening that is a family member, who isn't the primary care giver, there is a role you can play.

Often one family member will be the primary caregiver of senior loved ones, even when there are several children or grandchildren. We're not suggesting that's a problem or that changes are needed. After all, each family and each family member needs to decide what works best. What IS the case, though, that there can be a role for other family members in helping the caregiver who is the middle of the triple decker sandwich.

Other family members can be key in helping the caregiver understand that his or her needs are important as well. After all, the wellbeing of the caregiver is important to the wellbeing of those for whom they care, too.

Suggest to them that they need to identify those other areas of their lives that are important, as we discussed earlier and stay on them until they do it. Don't just say it, make sure they follow through. Once they have, stay on them until they follow through and make plans, make sure they address those areas, and hopefully on a regular basis.

Now you as family member can do more than talk to the one in the middle, of course. This is another area where actions can speak louder, and mean more, than words. When suggesting that the caregiver take time to assess those areas that are important, offer to fill in for them to give time away from their caregiving demands to let them get away. When the time comes to put plans in place, other family members can also make that a reality by stepping in. Offer to lighten their burden, such as stepping in to take their kids places, cooking a meal for their family or doing their yard work from time to time. There is a role for everyone in caring for the caregiver, helping them to reduce stress levels by checking items off the list they would otherwise worry are being ignored.

**Kathy:** Well, even long distance family members can play key active roles in supporting the family caregiver in the middle of the sandwich. Scheduling trips or arranging for loved ones to visit can give the caregiver enough time away to take a vacation themselves or even a long weekend from time to time. Such things can work wonders, not only the time away from the caregiving but the reassurance that others have the caregiver's back – that others care about them and their needs. Even more important, that others appreciate that they are caregivers and what it takes for them to fill the role.

**Barry:** So true Kathy, just knowing that others appreciate you can help lighten the load some.

With our senior loved ones living longer than in earlier generations and cost pressures putting acceptable alternatives out of the reach for many, the role of family caregivers can only grow over time. That will make it even more important to assure that the one who is the middle of the triple decker sandwich gets care, whether that is you or one of your family members.

**Kathy:** Remember that as a caregiver, you have two hands; one to help others and one to help yourself.

**Barry:** Ah. That's very good Kathy, I like that.

Now remember, the mission of Senior Care Corner is to provide information and resources to help those who have senior loved ones, including both primary caregivers and the rest of the family. Check out what we have on our blog and in our podcasts to see if what we have might help you. You might also want to take a look at the bookstore, to see if there are resources there that can help. If we're missing an area you would like us to address, we'd really love for you to let us know. You can leave a comment on our blog post, contact us through the website, put a note on our Facebook wall and just to make sure there are many ways as possible to contact us, soon we're going to give you the ability to leave a message on the Senior Care Corner phone hotline. There's more information on that to come.

But really we want to emphasize that it really is important that the one in the middle receive care.

**Kathy:** And remember that as a caregiver, try not to let your guilt interfere with taking care of yourself.

**Barry:** Certainly, that's a big reminder Kathy. I don't think we could over emphasize that.

Well, Kathy I guess you're going to close out our episode today with a quick tip?

**Kathy:** I will. Today's quick tip is:

Eat for Health

The US Department of Agriculture has adopted a new way to help us all make healthy food choices. It is called the MyPlate and you may have seen it on food packages recently.

MyPlate suggestions are based on age and have specific information for seniors.

Their tips include:

1. Build a healthy plate using the new MyPlate. Include all types of foods each day--- vegetables, fruits, whole grains, low fat dairy and protein foods.
2. Cut back on foods that are high in solid fat or added sugar and salt.
3. Eat the right amount of calories for you to help manage your weight. You can do this by cutting back on portion sizes not variety to manage weight while maintaining your health.

We will link the resources for your seniors in our show notes today to the MyPlate so you can see the specific guidelines for seniors.

**Barry:** I don't know how you do it Kathy, but you always seem to come up with some great quick tips. I appreciate it.

**Kathy:** Well thank you!

**Barry:** Well that's all for our episode today folks. We appreciate you joining us. Again remember to stop by our site at SeniorCareCorner.com or on Facebook at Senior Care Corner to leave your thoughts, comments, and suggestions. And until next time, we hope everybody has a great day.