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By Sharon Jayson

## Caregivers cope with stress, mixed emotions about aging parents

It's the little things that keep Betty Seckinger going when her day-to-day responsibilities caring for her 84-year-old mother-in-law, overseeing her 86-year-old mother and babysitting grandkids get to be a bit much.

To Seckinger of Winter Haven, Fla., once- or twice-a-year gambling trips, travels with her husband, Ralph, and sometimes overindulging on food are stress relievers for a routine filled with taking care of family members.

"You deal with a lot of ups and downs. You get frustrated," she says. "You want to be able to help your parents, but you don't want your own health to go downhill."

**COMMENTS:** [How do you cope with the stress from helping your aging parents?](#)

Experts say adults coping with an aged parent struggle with a range of emotions. Ambivalence is common — even a good relationship doesn't prevent mixed feelings. There's often some anger and resentment as unresolved family issues resurface. And there's plenty of guilt.

"No matter how much you love your parents, it's going to disrupt your life," says Roberta Satow, a sociology professor at Brooklyn College.

A USA TODAY/ABC News/Gallup poll of 500 boomers with living parents found that 31% of them are providing financial or personal care assistance to a parent. Slightly less than half of those providing help say it has caused them some stress or a great deal of stress, show the poll, conducted May 24-June 3.

**FULL RESULTS:** [USA TODAY/ABC News elder care poll](#)

Gail Gibson Hunt, president of the National Alliance for Caregiving, a non-profit group in Bethesda, Md., says caregivers seem to feel they're not doing enough. "Lots of times they will sacrifice their job, their other family members, sometimes their own kids or their spouses to take on this responsibility for their parents," she says.

Whether adult children have day-to-day caregiving tasks or periodically swoop in from afar, the ever-mounting difficulties faced by their elderly parents keep life out of balance. Emergencies and interruptions become commonplace as this legion of empty nesters, retirees and the sandwich generation still raising kids navigates the uncharted waters of today's increased longevity. Seckinger and millions of others like her are baby boomers finding themselves as direct or indirect caregivers for an aging parent in various stages of need.

"There's a lot of depression and sadness watching a parent who was competent and capable become frail and needy," says Donna Schempp of the San Francisco-based Family Caregiver Alliance, a non-profit group for caregivers. "It's very hard."

And potentially very long.

Satow says caregiving today may require more years than raising a child. "I've interviewed 70-year-olds taking care of 95-year-old mothers," she says. "It's a very long period of life."

Seckinger, a 60-year-old retired telephone equipment technician, says her in-laws moved in about 15 years ago when they couldn't afford to live by themselves anymore. It was just over a decade into her marriage — the second for both her and her husband. Her mother-in-law, Louise Seckinger, and her husband moved into a guest wing on a separate side of the one-story home. He died 10 years ago.

"She's to the point now where she needs an extreme amount of care. I have to bathe her. Sometimes I have to dress her," Seckinger says of her mother-in-law.

While her husband and their adult children try to help out, most responsibilities fall to her.

Her mother, Elizabeth Lockwood, has a degenerative eye condition and uses a cane but is in otherwise good health. The mother and daughter exercise three times a week at Curves. "It's really important for my mom to get out and be around other people because she lives by herself," Seckinger says.

Seckinger calls the semiannual gambling trips to Biloxi, Miss., or Las Vegas with her mother "my stress relief."

"The gambling trips we take help tremendously," she says. "And it gives me a chance to have one-on-one time with my mom."

### **Complex families**

The long length of time children are watching over aging parents is just one emerging trend affecting caregiving. Aside from being a caregiver for a number of years, Seckinger is also a stepparent, a fact shared by a growing number of boomers.

Research by Marilyn Coleman and her husband, Larry Ganong, both professors of human development and family studies at the University of Missouri, has looked at how remarriage affects obligations to older parents. They found that adults felt less obligation to take care of aging stepparents than their own parents.

"As families become more complex due to divorce and remarriage, the notion of caring for elderly family members also becomes much more complex," she says.

The outlook for elderly care is also shifting as a result of changes in the family demographic — older first-time parents having fewer children.

"People caring for their parents are in their 40s and 50s today. In the future, when more people caring for their parents are in their 30s, more of them are going to have young kids of their own, and that's going to make the pressures even more intense," says Richard Johnson, an aging specialist at the Urban Institute.

Smaller families will also make a difference, says William Frey of the Brookings Institution. "Not only are these children going to have older parents sooner, they'll have fewer brothers and sisters to help them with that task," he says.

### **Long-distance care**

The emotional tug of war that affects adults as their parents grow infirm isn't limited to the children close by. The parents of Jill Bruns, 56, of Kingwood, Texas, live in Sedalia, Mo., 90 miles east of Kansas City, but she still has been overseeing their care. She calls her parents every day and quit teaching last year when she had to make five trips in a year's time to help them.

"I feel badly they're so far away," she says. "If they were closer, it would really help me."

When she returned from her last two-week visit, her husband was diagnosed with heart failure and needed her. So now she has had to rely on others to assist her folks. "I've really been lucky to find people to help me out," she says.

Living far from aging parents increases stress and anxiety because you can't see firsthand how they are doing, Johnson says. Also, he says, there's that guilt again — not being there when your parents need you.

Douglas Wolf, a professor of aging studies at Syracuse University, has co-authored studies, based on thousands of responses from the federally funded Health and Retirement Study, that found health consequences for those who escape daily caregiving.

"If you have a parent who needs help and you're not providing help, then your mental health score goes down. If you have a parent who needs help and you do provide help, your mental health score goes down. It's no worse to be a caregiver than to not be a care-giver."

And Wolf says those who aren't direct caregivers don't reap any of the "rewards" or feelings of accomplishment associated with it.

Elaine Parker, 57, of Peachtree City, Ga., feels good about the situation she has created for her mother, Janice Snapp, 85. Parker, a retired teacher, and her husband, Phil, a retired airline pilot, built a small apartment addition to their home. Snapp moved there in 2004. "Basically, I just wash her clothes and feed her," Parker says. "She calls it assisted living with love."

Snapp says the setup "feels like home. I can have my privacy, and they can have their privacy."

At the Seckinger home, there's also more privacy for the couple. Ralph's sister in Bessemer, Ala., retired 18 months ago, so Louise Seckinger now splits her time between the households. "We're trying to work it out every three to four months off," Betty Seckinger says. "We would all like to be able to do things with our grandkids. And we're trying to do some travel while we're both in the health to do it. We're trying to make the best of the situation and be thankful it's not worse. At least we still have both moms."