

June Senior Sense: 4 Tips for Balancing Caregiving with a Career

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I had taken the day off from work to bring my mother to her primary care doctor for a checkup. “Why doesn’t she live with you,” the doctor asked me? Clearly, he had strong opinions about how I should be caring for my mother. I explained to him that I worked, a lot, and that I frequently traveled for my job and therefore wasn’t home much during the week. “Well what about your husband,” he asked. I knew there was more my husband and I could be doing for my mother, but I also knew we needed to pay our mortgage, and save for our own retirements and long-term care. How were we supposed to do both?

Balancing eldercare and career can be difficult under the best circumstances. Juggling the two now, in the midst of a global health crisis, has become an even greater balancing act for so many caregivers. We may no longer be taking the day off from a physical workplace for an in-person doctor’s appointment, but we have new challenges. Many of us are trying to work from home and care for an aging parent who lives with us, at the same time. Others may be reporting to a workplace every day and worried about exposing an aging parent to the coronavirus. All of us are trying to navigate a heightened sense of pressure at work, a heightened sense of concern for the elderly, and a heightened sense of stress overall.

There are steps we can take to reduce that stress and better balance the often competing priorities of career and care. Here are some suggestions for making the two compatible:

1. **Lower your standards.** Especially now, as we deal with so much uncertainty, give yourself the gift of lowered standards. Determine what you absolutely must do well – meeting critical deadlines at work and managing your parent’s daily medications, for example – and what you can let go of. Now is not the time to strive for a zero inbox at the end of every day, or to keep your house looking like an *Architectural Digest* photo spread. Now is the time for doing your best in a few key areas and letting the rest slide. In this new normal, more screen time for our parents and kids, unmade beds, and slower response time on non-urgent emails, are all okay.
2. **Keep your work, and your caregiving files, as organized as possible.** While now may be the right time to lower some standards, it is not a good time to become disorganized. Plan as if you might have an emergency at any moment. At work, that means copying coworkers on emails to clients, keeping your boss updated on important projects, and filing and labeling electronic documents so that other people can access your work if needed. At home that means, reviewing your parent’s wishes for healthcare intervention should they need it and making sure you know the account log in and passwords to their financial accounts. It means making sure your parents’ advanced directives, powers of attorney and healthcare proxies are updated and knowing exactly where those documents are. The more prepared you are for a potential emergency, the more you can focus on your day-to-day work, because you know if something does go wrong, you have planned as best you can for it.
3. **Overcommunicate at work and at home.** You are juggling two important, and sometimes competing priorities. Don’t assume that your coworkers understand your challenges and responsibilities at home, and don’t assume the family members who depend on you understand your priorities and responsibilities at work. Overcommunicate at work by sharing what you are working on, what you need from others in order to be successful, and when your colleagues can expect completed assignments. If you find your delivery timelines are slipping, share status updates right away. On the home front, let the people you care for know when you are busy with work and when they can expect you to be available to them. Do not apologize for having to work; likewise don’t feel the need to apologize at work for having family-related responsibilities. The lines between work and home have blurred like never before and reasonable managers and family members will understand you are balancing both.
4. **Play the long game.** As a family caregiver, especially one in the midst of a pandemic, you may not be in a position at this moment to pursue your career goals the way you may want to. Don’t despair. Be realistic about what you can take on, and know that whatever you decide is best for you right now, doesn’t have to be forever. You are doing important work - both the paid and the unpaid. Remember that. And know that your priorities, your responsibilities, and your opportunities, will continue to shift. Do your best to shift with them.

Balancing caregiving with career is one of the most challenging things I have had to do as an adult. But by focusing on what is important to me, ignoring unsolicited opinions from other people - like my mother’s primary care physician, and staying focused on my long term goals, I make it work for me, my colleagues, and my family.

Liz O'Donnell is the founder of [Working Daughter](#) and the author of [Working Daughter: A Guide To Caring For your Aging Parents While Making A Living](#). For caregiving support, information and resources contact a Senior Care Advisor at Care.com. We are master's-level social workers specializing in adult and senior care. Call us today at (855) 781-1303 x3 or email questions to careplanning@care.com

