

## June Senior Sense: Balancing Caregiving and a Return to Work

By Liz O'Donnell

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With more than 36 percent of the country vaccinated against COVID-19, and the CDC loosening the guidance on masks, many Americans are preparing a return to the office or workplace. While for some these updates are viewed as a harbinger of a return to normalcy, for many family caregivers, they signal a change in caregiving routines that could be disruptive and stressful.

One of the many adjustments managers and workers alike had to make in 2020 was a blurring of the lines between work responsibilities and home life. Parents had to step away from client calls to log their children on to remote classrooms. A generation of pandemic puppies barked their way through virtual staff meetings. And the occasional elderly parent photobombed Zoom meetings. Even the least flexible work cultures had to bend – but the question is will they continue to do so when their workforce is back on site? Maybe not to the same degree– but with some preplanning, expectation setting and patience, family caregivers can have a successful return to work. I spoke to two women who have already returned and their advice is encouraging.

Patti Savage worked through those photobombs in 2020 and has since returned to the office. An accountant, she started working from the home she shares with her 84-year-old father last March. He has mild to moderate Alzheimer's. It was difficult to manage a staff remotely and care for her father. "He thinks nothing about coming in room and having a conversation and he has been known to photobomb a Zoom meeting," she says of the at-home experience. "Everybody just says, 'Hi Dad.'"

Recently, she returned to the office three days a week. "While he's still living," she says, "I can't see being at the office 5 days." She says she had to relearn how to plan for the day and that the three days in the office and two days at home means she has to tote her computer and files back and forth. For her, grouping her days in the office together makes her feel like "less of a pack mule."

The biggest challenge has been her father's loneliness while she is at work. "He doesn't drive so he is isolated. He looks at his watch every time I walk in." And after a long day, it can be tough on Patti to be on call for her father who has been waiting for her. She is working on setting his expectations for the new arrangement. But overall she says she is glad to be back in the office. "For my own mental health, it's good for me. And it is nice to wear makeup again and go out to lunch."

Amy Henke has also had to reset expectations. She actually went back to work last year after a brief time working at home and she says the transition took time. Amy hired paid caregivers but even still, she was on call at first. "They were coming to me with questions. 'Can I do this? She doesn't want this.' The first week was rough."

Amy's mother was upset that Amy had returned to the office, and at first she wouldn't eat. Luckily, the caregiver Amy hired had years of experience and encouraged Amy, telling her it would get better.

It did. Amy and her mother eventually established a new routine and their days were smoother. Both Amy and Patti encourage others to give their new routines time. "It's fine to let that routine develop," says Amy. "You've got to trust and give it time."

They also recommend practicing morning routines before returning full time in order to smooth out any kinks in your plan. And know that you are not alone. "A lot of people will be going through this at the same time," says Amy. With a lot of planning and even more patience, these family caregivers are making work outside of the home work again.

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](mailto:careplanning@care.com)

