

## **When Your Sandwich Generation Marriage Feels Flat and Lifeless**

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

As a "Sandwich Generation" adult, it may seem like all you can get done in a day involves assisting your aging parents and in-laws while catering to the continuing demands of children, adolescents, or "emerging adult" children. Being on the front line with providing your aging parents with care or supervision of daily functioning tasks, transportation, and coordination of medical care. You may be one of their main supports for financial, physical, and emotional assistance. You may still be the cab service for the family, taking kids to dance practice, football games, and shopping. You may still be in the middle or latter part of your career. You might be parenting boomerang and never-launched emerging adult children.

Regardless of why they never launched or launched and returned, they are back home, and they need to learn the basics of how to pick up after themselves or make a meal. The burden of financially, domestically, emotionally, and physically supporting three generations is enormous. It may seem like your resources — time, energy, and money — are in constant use for caring for everyone but yourself. After all, it is impossible to care for all these other people, perform well at work, and find time for yourself. Right?

Wrong! Although it seems like spending time with your spouse is a pipe dream, it is possible if you prioritize it. When you prioritize everyone else and their needs, adding yourself to the mix may not even feel worth it. Most sandwich-generation folks experience anxiety and depression when facing difficult choices about prioritizing to make time for their own lives. Stress is high; self-care and relationship care are the most frequent casualties.

Whether you are an effective team or the lone ranger in these endeavors, when it comes to connecting emotionally to your beloved, you may think

that neither one of you has enough left at the end of the day to share it with your spouse. Brain-dead by bedtime, there's little left to have anything but a superficial or logistical conversation, much less engage in passionate sex.

Your unilateral problem-solving may prohibit asking for help because it just sets off another round of blaming and criticizing each other for not being more helpful. You know that you are tired, and you may not be able to remember the last conversation that wasn't about "caregiving." Your marriage and your life may seem lifeless. You want more out of your marriage and life but don't know what to do besides occasionally complaining.

Your spouse "should" know what you want and need and what to do about it. After all, you've been married for 30 years. In reality, neither you nor your partner have good mind-reading and fortune-telling abilities. You both have unreasonable expectations of each other when you most need and want each other's help, acceptance, and understanding. After all, this is one of the most stressful times in your life.

Fortunately, there are some things you can do to restore a sense of well-being and balance to your life. By recovering your most potent stress management resource – the love and care still a part of your marital relationship—you can regain a sense of agency over your life and reclaim the warm, tender support you once had for each other. When spouses care for each other's health and peace of mind, they seek to provide emotional support, be considerate of each other's time and energy, provide supportive services, and put their partner first sometimes.

To get there from here, partners must have an effective system of communication and problem-solving for the tasks at hand. Each partner has to have the same information. Assuming that your partner knows what you know is a recipe for miscommunication and hurt feelings. Partners can function as the executive committee for working with the other two generations by identifying appropriate boundaries and expectations and communicating those clearly among the generations. They can work together to deal with irresponsibility and other issues in emerging adult

children, conjoint decision-making and reinforcing each other's contribution to the solution.

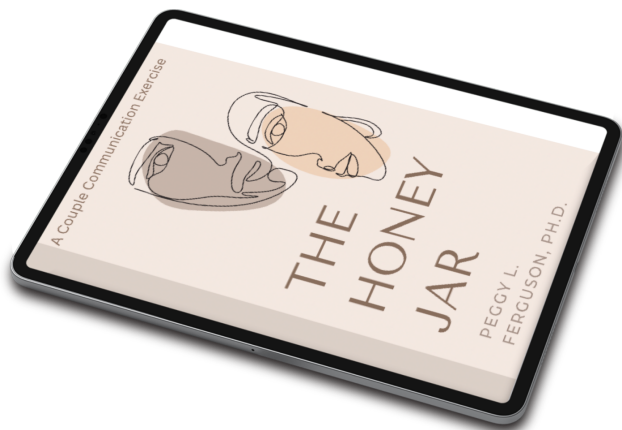
The executive committee also gets to set boundaries with aging parents. When the previous generation can no longer adequately care for themselves at home, the executive committee can take action to get all the significant people on the same page so that they can problem-solve as a team for their parent's health and well-being. They back each other up. They consider their partner's scheduling issues, their own, and the people they are helping. They never throw their partner under the bus to appease someone else. They may need to assist each other in working through any guilt and sadness about the necessity of putting aging parents in nursing homes or other alternatives that may not be what anyone wants.

The executive committee gets to give themselves a raise or a vacation as needed. It might take some more juggling, but you can do it. You can reclaim your life, some semblance of balance, and happiness by refocusing on your marriage. Grounding yourself in the loving embrace of your partner who loves, understands, and accepts you makes all the difference in managing stress and putting the tasks demanded each day into the proper perspective.

You probably didn't think your life would be like this at this time. Nothing lasts forever. The challenges of today will pass, and you can help each other with resilience by being there for each other. Additional resources are probably available to you —not just to help with older people and kids, but to reclaim your life. Utilize the support systems in your family, church, and your community to refocus on your marriage. There are probably more resources available than you know. You don't have to do everything yourself. Make time for your relationship by taking up a sport, craft, or hobby that you can do together. Go on dates. Go out with friends. Turn off the television. Play your music and dance in the kitchen. Sit and talk to each other—just the two of you every day.

Develop an "Ing List," a list of activities you want to do together. Set aside special times during the day and week for communication, one session for the executive meeting to plan and problem solve, and one couples'

feelings meeting to reconnect. Use the [Family Feelings Meeting Guide](#) or [The Honey Jar](#) to open up the lines of communication. Carve out the time, and do it. You will be rewarded. You have a life to live, even through this difficult time. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2011 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.**



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*The challenges faced by the "Sandwich Generation" can leave little time or energy for fostering emotional connection and intimacy with our partners. Yet, despite the chaos and stress, it's crucial to remember that prioritizing your marriage is possible and essential for your well-being and the health of the marriage and the family. The Honey Jar: A Couple Communication Exercise is a simple but powerful tool that offers couples a structured approach to reconnecting emotionally. Regular use of The Honey Jar helps couples carve out dedicated time for meaningful communication and intimacy. By prioritizing your relationship and investing in intentional communication, you can reclaim a sense of balance, joy, and fulfillment in your marriage while weathering life's challenges with love, resilience, and grace.*