

Sandwich generation: Managing dual-caring duties around work



More people than ever are juggling childcare and caring for older relatives, often quietly and without recognition. This article explores the challenges faced by the “sandwich generation” and different types of support that can help to ease the strain.

What do we mean by the term “sandwich generation”?

A *sandwich carer* is typically a working-age person who is looking after children while also caring for older parents or relatives - essentially “sandwiched” between two sets of caring responsibilities. This is found to be mainly women, with children under the age of 21 living at home.

There are estimated to be more than **one million people in the UK in dual-caring roles**, and with an ageing population, more adults of working age are finding themselves part of the sandwich generation. This experience can often go unseen and can feel isolating, which is why talking about it matters.

The NHS defines a carer as **anyone (including children and adults) who looks after a family member, partner, or friend who needs help because of illness, frailty, disability, a mental health problem, or an addiction, and cannot cope without their support**. Crucially, this care is unpaid.

Many people in caring roles don’t realise they are carers. It can be hard to separate the caring role from the relationship - you may see yourself simply as a parent, child, partner, sibling or friend - but raising awareness is important, because identifying as a carer can open the door to support.

What impact can it have?

Balancing caring responsibilities at both ends of life can take a toll emotionally, physically, and financially. Some common challenges include:

Mental health and emotional wellbeing

Balancing these multiple responsibilities often leads to stress, anxiety, and emotional strain, as carers can

feel torn between competing demands and guilty for not being able to meet everyone’s needs.

Having to make decisions on behalf of those being cared for is another factor that can add to worry and overwhelm, with fear around making the “wrong” caregiving decisions. This kind of pressure can contribute to sleep disruption and neglect of self-care, which in turn affects both physical and mental wellbeing.

According to the ONS, around a fifth (19%) of sandwich carers report being currently diagnosed with depression, compared with 13% of all adults. With little time for rest or to look after yourself, it’s not surprising the impact it can have on mental health.

Physical health

Sandwich carers may find that physical activity and other self-care routines are pushed down the priority list. The combined physical and emotional toll of caregiving can contribute to symptoms such as muscle tension, headaches and make existing conditions or pain feel worse.

Diet and nutrition may also be affected, when there isn’t time to cook or money to afford to create nutritious meals from scratch. Fatigue and low mood can further drive cravings for sugar or high-carbohydrate foods, creating additional challenges for maintaining overall physical health.

Practical and logistical pressures

Supporting young children while managing the needs of an ill or ageing parent can be difficult to juggle — especially if those relatives do not live locally. This may involve travelling, coordinating medical appointments, managing paperwork, or

providing emotional support from afar. Caring responsibilities can extend internationally too, with some employees supporting family overseas.

Financial strain

Dual-caring can impact family finances, from childcare costs and travel expenses to reduced working hours. According to [Carers UK](#), more than 600 people a day leave their jobs due to caring responsibilities, while many others reduce their hours, take lower-paid roles, or put their career progression on hold.

Impact at work

In the workplace, sandwich carers may experience absenteeism, reduced productivity, or difficulty progressing in their careers due to the time and energy required for caregiving.

The stress of balancing multiple responsibilities can also affect concentration and overall energy, and some carers may feel pressure to “hold everything together,” making it difficult to ask for help or discuss their situation at work.

A supportive workplace can make a real difference: offering flexibility, reasonable adjustments, and openly sharing resources for unpaid carers can help employees manage their responsibilities more effectively, maintain balance, and feel supported in their roles.

What support is available?

No one should feel they have to manage dual-caring responsibilities alone. Different options are available that could help to make a meaningful difference:

Speak to your manager or HR

Many workplaces are increasingly recognising the challenges faced by carers. If you feel comfortable, have a chat with your line manager or HR team to find out what help you have access to via your employer. You could also check if there is a policy in place for employees with carer responsibilities.

Things such as flexible working options, adjusted hours, or hybrid arrangements may help with balance and reduce some of the pressure. Opening up a conversation is often the first step.

Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs)

Check if you have access to an EAP through your employer. This service is often available 24/7 to give confidential emotional and practical support to unpaid carers, including:

- Counselling for stress, anxiety, and burnout
- Information and guidance on caring roles
- Support for financial concerns
- Legal advice around rights and entitlements

Reaching out early can prevent issues from escalating.

Support for unpaid carers

There are organisations dedicated to helping carers find community and guidance, such as [Carers UK](#), [Carer's Trust](#), and local authority support services.

These can offer advice on:

- Benefits and financial help
- Local respite services
- Support groups and peer networks
- Practical guidance and checklists

Many carers say connecting with others in a similar situation helps reduce isolation and creates a sense of understanding and shared experience. [Carers UK have a forum](#) where you can connect with others, you may also have local networks you can tap into too.

Practical strategies

As well as the links to support, there are some steps you could take to help manage the responsibilities and open up some more time for your own wellbeing. Below we've listed a few examples:

- **Time-blocking and realistic planning:** Break tasks into small, predictable chunks and schedule them into your week, rather than trying to do everything at once. Prioritise what truly needs to be done today, and let less urgent tasks wait.
- **Sharing tasks within the family:** Don't try to shoulder everything alone, ask partners, siblings, older children or extended family to pitch in. Even small contributions, like preparing dinner once a week or helping with school drops, can lighten the load.

- **Using tech (reminders, scheduling, carer apps):** Try shared digital calendars, medication reminder apps or tools designed for carers to keep important information in one place. This can help reduce stress and prevent things from slipping through the cracks.
- **Finding micro-moments for yourself:** When time for yourself is scarce, look for pockets where you can have micro-moments for some self-care. This could be a five-minute breathing exercise before you begin work, a 10-minute lay down before leaving the house, or taking an hour (if available) to batch-cook yourself something for the week ahead.
- **Setting boundaries and saying “no”:** It’s ok to step back from extra responsibilities or social plans when your plate is full. Practice being honest about what you can manage, and give yourself permission to protect your time and energy.
- **If you are struggling, seek support:** Whether this is a visit to your GP, or accessing a service such as an EAP through your employer. In the first instance, it might just be sharing your struggles with someone else. Support is out there to help you manage and balance your responsibilities.

Try to keep in mind that you are not alone

Being part of the sandwich generation can be tough - emotionally, practically and financially. Recognising the role you play, understanding what support exists,

and knowing where to turn can make things feel more manageable.

If you’re in this position, please know that support is available. Speaking up, reaching out, and sharing your experience can help take some of the weight off your shoulders.

Further links to support

NHS - Support and benefits for carers.

NHS (Scotland) – Support for unpaid carers.

Scottish Action for Mental Health – Coping with caring for someone else.

NHS (Wales) – Support for unpaid carers.

Citizen’s Advice – Practical support for carers.

Citizen’s Advice (Ireland) – Payments and support for unpaid carers.

Mind – Coping while caring for someone else.

GOV.UK – Information on benefits and financial support.

Samaritans – You can call 116 123 anytime to speak with a Samaritan who will listen without judgement and offer emotional support.

Sources:

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/commissioning/comm-carers/carers/>
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy4jew5ez02o>