



This section is set up to provide a ready-made Brown Bag Session for you to use with employees and/or managers. Use as is, or adapt this information for a general employee group. You may reproduce as many copies as needed.

A Personal Approach to Assisting Employee Caregivers

Approximately 40 million Americans care for an elderly or disabled loved one. These caregivers are abundant in the workforce, and yet, the role of caregiving is so daunting that many working caregivers often question whether they should remain at their jobs. Here are some of the thoughts circling through their overwhelmed minds:

“I’m just breaking even if I move my dad into assisted living and keep working. It’s like I’ll be working just to pay the assisted living bill! I should just quit work and have him move in with me.”

“With all that I have going on with the kids and my in-laws who have been in and out of the hospital a lot lately, not to mention the dog, I may as well just stop working and focus on all of that.”

“I don’t really like my job anyway, and if I quit I can focus on being there for my mother. She is having some health problems, and it’s likely to get worse because she is in her late eighties.”

Important Questions to Ask Employee Caregivers

If you, as an employee assistance professional, are hearing these types of comments from employee caregivers, the following are nine questions you can ask to help them gain clarity when they consider that work plus caregiving is just too much. (Room is provided below for the employee to respond to each question, as well as a possible reply for the EA professional.)

1. Even though working while caregiving has been stressful, have there been times when work has been a welcome distraction from your caregiving worries?

Suggested EAP response might be: *“Does your job actually offer a relief from caregiving?”*

Even though business trips can be exhausting, have they given you a much-needed break from tending to your loved one? When you are really focused on a project at work, does it take your mind off all the doctor’s appointments you’ve been shuttling your loved one to?

2. Are there reasons besides caregiving that make you want to leave your job?

Suggested EAP response might be: *“Have you considered other options?”*

Is it just caregiving prompting you to consider quitting? Or is it a new boss you just can’t stand? Could simply changing jobs within the organization be a better option? Sometimes remaining in the workforce while working part time may be the best option of all.

3. Have you considered taking FMLA (Family Medical Leave Act) time as a trial run?

Suggested EAP response might be: *“Use FMLA as a leave of absence FIRST before making a more permanent decision.”*

Trying FMLA as trial run offers freedom for the caregiver to test how you would manage as a full-time caregiver while maintaining a safety net so that your job will still be there if so desired. “You might take three weeks of FMLA and say, ‘No way! I am not cut out for taking care of my mother full time.’”

However, others may think, “Wow, life sure is easier when I don’t have to juggle so much.” While most caregivers’ reactions to taking FMLA aren’t quite so polarized, the respondent will at least get a taste of what life might be like if he/she decides to be a full-time caregiver.

4. Besides the paycheck and benefits, what else would you be giving up if you left your job?

Suggested EAP response might be: *“Would you miss the social aspects of your job?”*

Many caregivers who have left the workplace obviously miss using their education and job skills and the feeling of accomplishment that a job well done offers. But many also miss the social component of the workplace. Do you have friends you enjoy seeing at work? Are you in a fantasy football league at the office? Do you walk with your colleagues during lunch? Would you miss this daily camaraderie?

5. How difficult would it be to re-enter the workplace if full-time caregiving didn’t suit you?

Suggested EAP response might be: *“Where are you at in your career? Just what would you do if you decided to go back to work?”*

Especially if you are at the executive level, highly paid and/or in a technology field, it could be very challenging to find a new job.

6. What are the potential long-term repercussions of leaving the workplace?

Suggested EAP response might be: *“What would you be giving up in terms of not only salary but also benefits?”*

For example, perhaps working several more years would give you an opportunity to contribute more to your 401K. If you retire prematurely might it be difficult for you to pay for your own care needs if you live until your nineties? Would that put undue pressure on your own adult kids someday?

7. What message would leaving the workplace send to others with whom you share caregiving duties?

Suggested EAP response might be: *“Have you thought about what your family would think about you quitting your job – be it good, bad, or otherwise?”*

For instance, if you are caring for your elderly mother, will your siblings assume you can handle everything now since you are “not working?” In many families, those retired or not working are often automatically expected to take on more than everyone else because of their freer schedules.

8. Could you craft a proposal to work an alternative schedule?

Suggested EAP response might be: *“Are you really locked in to working 9-5 or do you just think you are? Have you asked your boss if other hours and schedules might be available?”*

Generationally speaking – although this is changing as remote work becomes more common – Millennial and Generation X bosses in particular, are often open to non 9-to-5 schedules. In fact, many organizations have policies that encourage alternative work schedules, particularly when they are at risk for losing a valued worker. *As an employee assistance professional, you may be able to help the client make a strong case for how an alternative schedule would be mutually beneficial.*

9. Would you really be serving your loved one best by staying home with him or her full-time?

Suggested EAP response might be: *“Have you really thought about what it would be like to care for your loved one on a full-time basis? Have you considered whether you are even qualified to provide that much care, and that level of care?”*

Many caregivers, unless they are trained health-care providers, often realize they don’t have the skills or education necessary to best provide care for a sick, injured, or disabled individual. You may have been comfortable giving medication or handling routine tasks around the house, but what if your elderly loved one needs physical therapy after a fall?

Perhaps Mom’s physical condition has deteriorated to a point where she needs professional care from a nurse at a nursing home. While many caregivers balk at utilizing the services of nursing homes, assisted living settings, care agencies, etc., these professionals are not only more experienced with health issues, they possess more objectivity. If your disabled husband says he wants to stay in bed all day, an activities director at an assisted living may have experience encouraging reluctant patients like him to exercise.

Summary

As an employee assistance professional, you have likely supported countless clients facing circumstances like these. However, don’t forget that if *you* are also coping with an elderly parent or other loved one, always strive to treat yourself with the same empathy and compassion that you would offer a struggling client. ■

Source: Jennifer L. FitzPatrick, MSW, LCSW-C, CSP, the author of “Cruising through Caregiving: Reducing the Stress of Caring for Your Loved On” and a gerontology instructor at Johns Hopkins University. Her company, Generations Health Education, helps reduce stress while boosting productivity, morale, and revenue through generational awareness.

Determining if Your Loved One Needs Help

We all know that all too often, we are the last ones to look in a mirror and admit, “*Yeah, that’s me.*” Along similar lines, after a lifetime of caring for themselves and raising a family, it can be very difficult for a loved one to admit that he/she can no longer adequately care for him/herself. While this handout should not be seen as a substitute for medical advice, it can go a long way toward determining if caregiving assistance is in order.

❖ **Physical health.** Has the elderly individual been diagnosed with any chronic illnesses such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or arthritis? What about other diseases, such as bowel or bladder problems, heart disease, stroke or cancer? Does he/she have vision or hearing problems, excessive weight loss or gain, or difficulty walking? Make a list of health care professionals currently used, and add any recent hospital stays.

❖ **Mental health.** Has the elderly person been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s or another form of dementia? Do you know what the early warning signs are?

❖ **Medication use.** What medications is the individual currently taking? What is the dosage? How often? Is he/she taking the medication as directed?

❖ **Daily living skills.** Is the elderly individual able to dress, bathe, get up from a chair, use a toilet, climb stairs, and use the phone? Does the elderly parent or other relatives know how to get help in case of an emergency? Can he/she shop, prepare meals, do housework, and drive safely?

❖ **Home and community safety.** How safe is the neighborhood where the elderly person lives? Does the elderly individual’s home have smoke alarms, and can they be heard adequately? Is your loved one able to avoid phone and door-to-door fraud? What about maintaining the house?

❖ **Support systems.** Does the elderly individual have visitors or see friends? Does he/she go to a Senior Center, or get out of the house for other social reasons? Do family members live close by? DO they know the names, addresses, and phone numbers of friends, family, and/or neighbors who can be called in an emergency?

❖ **Appearance and hygiene.** How is the elderly person’s overall appearance? Hair clean? Teeth brushed? Shaved?

❖ **Finances.** Does the elderly person’s income cover basic living expenses? Can future needs be met with current income? Are there any legal documents such as trusts, living wills, and/or durable power of attorney? Are bills paid on time?

Summary

An assessment like this can help solve problems and allow a parent or other elderly person to remain independent longer. It’s not always easy to recognize when an elder loved one needs help. Learning how to assess their needs will make it easier to know when, and how, to seek help. ■

Source: American Association of Retired Persons (www.aarp.org).