

From Broken to Beautiful
A Primer on Marriage Counseling
Week 11 – The Sandwich Generation

Introduction:

Big Statement:

The primary relationship in marriage is always with the SPOUSE. That seems obvious, but there are seasons of life where either children, parents, or both can consume a spouse's energy, attention, and time leaving little left for the spouse.

The Sandwich Generation Defined:

Those sandwiched between aging PARENTS who need care/help and their own CHILDREN who also need care/help.

According to the Pew Research Center nearly half (47%) of adults in their 40s and 50s have parents aged 65 or older and are either raising a young child or financially supporting a grown child (age 18 or older). And about one-in-seven middle-aged adults (15%) provide financial support to both an aging parent and a child. Four in ten say that both their children and their parents rely on them for emotional support. This demographic continues to climb. It's estimated that by 2030 there will be 60 million Americans between the ages of 66-88.

This season of life is widely considered to be the most stressful stage of life. Exhaustion, conflict, and depression are common characteristics, and some marriages do not survive it. So, what does all of this mean? It's a common situation facing many people today, but it will become increasingly common as medical advancements allow people to live longer than ever, hopefully, with a better quality of life. So, if you're not there now, you're likely to be or your children will be as they care for you.

There is a need to balancing three Biblical MANDATES:

1. Pursuing increasing and pervasive INTIMACY with your spouse (Genesis 2:24-25).
2. Raising your CHILDREN in the care and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).
3. Supporting your PARENTS in the elderly years (1 Timothy 5:3-4, 8).

That's a lot of responsibility to fit into a single day that probably has several other competing responsibilities. I use the word "competing" on purpose. We all have a limited amount of time, focus, and energy. The tension exists in how we choose to divide that limited quantity.

Question:

What questions would you ask in the data gathering phase to better understand the dynamics and impact of raising children while simultaneously caring for an aging parent?

What ages are their children and if they are in they have graduated HS, what are their plans to move toward independence? What is the health of their parent(s)? Do one of them spend significant time away from the home to care for a parent or visit with college aged or grown children?

Are there any feelings of resentment or bitterness in the marriage with regard to time spent away?
How often do they argue about these issues? Is there a difference between who's parent it is?

Notice Exodus 20:12

Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. (Exodus 20:12)

The word "Honor" literally means to "**GIVE WEIGHT**" to something or to consider someone worthy of **ATTENTION** and **OBEDIENCE**.

We've got to chat about this. There may be an expiration date on giving absolute obedience to your parents, but I would contend that there is no expiration date to honoring them, giving weight to them, or deeming them worthy of your attention.

I taught our children that adulthood isn't measured by one's age but by one's level of responsibility and independence. So, even when my kids were in their 20's but living at home, there was a level of obedience that I expected (functional children versus functional adult). But they are both fully functional adults with families of their own, so obedience is no longer the expectation. Honoring one's parents, however, is a responsibility that a child carries not as long as the parent lives, but as long as the child lives.

Question:

What are some practical ways that you can "honor" your parents even as an adult? What factors can make this difficult?

Speak well (respectfully) of them, don't belittle them in their struggles, call them, visit them, serve them as you can, tell them how much you appreciate the way they served you and sacrificed for you. There is an implied sincerity in honoring our parents rather than just honoring them with our lips as Israel was often guilty of.

Past unresolved conflicts and sin can hinder future involvement (abusive childhood). Even in these situations there is a command to honor them. The way that I do that with my father's memory and personal legacy in my life is to stick to the facts and avoid embellishing for the sake of heaping shame on his memory.

See 1 Timothy 5:3-8

- The word "Godliness" in verse 4 means to "worship well" or to "Fulfill one's **DUTY** before God."
- Likewise, the phrase "...make some return..." means to give something necessary in the fulfillment of an **OBLIGATION** or expectation. It has the idea of "repaying a debt."

So, here we have a clear command that the practice of our faith begins in the home and that we have an obligation to repay those who have invested in us. Paul says, this is pleasing in the sight of God. So, we have these two mandates to care for those who are in front of us and for those who are coming up behind us.

The Relationship Cycle:

As our children get more and more **INDEPENDENT** our parents will become more and more **DEPENDANT**. This cycle requires wisdom to navigate successfully.

- Your counselee will need to know when to **STOP** treating your children like children and when start treating them like mature adults and, Lord willing, brothers and sisters in Christ.

There must come a time in your child's life when you begin to invest more responsibility in them and greater measures of authority to make decisions. A parent must move from being their child's dictator to being a coach or mentor guiding them through the decision making process.

I would caution against letting a "Functional Child" fully operate like an independent adult in your home. There needs to be a measure of **DISCOMFORT** to motivate them to keep moving toward independence.

- You will need to know when it's time to **START** parenting your parents.

Understand that this is a very sensitive time in a parent's life. There will often be resistance to any perceived change in their level of independence. It's important to still honor them in any transition and to remember that often times they don't perceive their declines the same you that you do. So, there will be a disconnect between you.

- When Michele was caring for her grandmother she referred to the last four years of her life as the teenage years. She gave up her car and became dependent on her for rides, groceries, doctor's appointments, etc.
- She described the last year of her life like raising a 3-year-old. She wanted her independence but was dependent on her for nearly everything but could resist attempts to help.
- She described the last three weeks of her life as like having a toddler who couldn't care for her own basic needs.
- And the last 24 hours was like having a new born. She had needs but she couldn't communicate them to her.

Question:

What are some markers along the journey of life that will tell when you ought to start doing these two things (moving one's children toward independence and taking more responsibility for one's parents)?

For their children – age would play a part, maturity, past responses to tastes of independence and responsibility. For their parents – health, living situation, physical stamina, memory, and cognitive abilities (problem solving, paying bills, taking medicine, etc.).

- Your counselees will need a **SHARED** willingness to **SACRIFICE**.

As you get more and more involved in elder care it requires more and more sacrifice of your routine, time, and resources. You may need to adjust your work hours, if possible. There may be a reduction in personal income as you help with increased medical costs, medical equipment, and renovations to allow your loved one to stay in their home longer or to move into yours. And, oh yeah, you may have kids going to college or setting up a first apartment. This is fertile ground for conflict.

Practical Tips to Share for Surviving the Sandwich Years:

1. Learn to **PRIORITIZE** wants versus needs that are coming from both directions and learn to say, “No.”
2. Transition into a **MENTORING** role with their older children.
3. Involve their **FAMILY** in the elder care process as much as possible. Women will spend twice as much time caring for an elderly parent than men will, even when that parent is an in-law.
4. Involve their **SIBLINGS** in the elder process.
5. They will need to maintain regular **COMMUNICATION** with everyone and be willing to have difficult conversations.
 - Are their **SPIRITUAL** affairs in order? Are they saved...really?
 - Are their **LEGAL** and **FINANCIAL** affairs in order (Power of Attorney, Health Proxies, Wills, etc.)?
 - Are their final **WISHES** understood and in order? They must be willing to discuss the inevitability of death with their parents.
6. Help the aging parent to stay as **INDEPENDENT** as possible for as long as possible.
7. Help the aging parent to maintain their **DIGNITY**.

This is where compassion comes in. Put yourself in their place. They are often embarrassed about their condition, their limitations, their health, and their actions. It's about understanding that they have built lives, raised families, had productive careers and they see themselves as “less than” in their final years. If it's hard on you, it's hard on them as well.

8. Teach the counselee to **CARE** for themselves without feeling guilty.

Care giver fatigue is a real thing. Compassion can give way to frustration. You can so wear yourself out that you can't provide them with the care they need anymore. Ask for help. Take time for leisure and hobbies, as appropriate. Communicate your needs as well. Don't function on assumptions that everyone should be able to see that you're tired too.

9. Prepare your counselee for the **RELIEF** and the **GRIEF** that will accompany the end of this season.

The sandwich generation is only a season and it always ends in some form of loss. Either the child moves out or the aging parent passes. That usually brings a mix of sadness and relief that the stress of caregiving is over. The counselee should be prepared for that and not feel guilty. They should also be encouraged to consider what their life will be about when it isn't consumed with caring for someone else.

Homework:

- Caring for an Aging Parent Checklist
- Means of Grace Assignment
- Help for the Caregiver pamphlet by Michael Emlet
- Caring for an Aging Parent pamphlet by Byron Peters
- How to Love Difficult Parents pamphlet by Jim Newheiser

Conclusion:

This is a very stressful season, but it's only for a season. Our Counselees need to know that Christ is their strength. He is sovereign over this, and every season of life, and He is using it to conform them to the image of Christ as He works through them to care for those they love.