



# Role reversal

Baby boomers face stress of juggling care of aging parents and staying focused on the job

Dean Crites (left) and friend Robert McCoy at Crites Field in Waukesha.



Caregiver and son Gary Crites

Photo by Corey Hengen

At 94, pioneering aviator Dean Crites flew his airplane, but wasn't allowed to drive a car. His friend, 82-year-old Robert McCoy, still had his driver's license and gave him rides to the airport. While Crites flew the plane, McCoy took aerial photographs of Milwaukee. Crites' freedom in the sky, and independence at home, was important to him and his family.

Crites lived alone in his Waukesha home, near the airport he helped create. At 95, his family began to notice signs of dementia and frailty. He was cooking meals at odd hours, falling down a lot and losing his eyesight. His son, Gary Crites, who lives in the Northshore, began to sleep over at his dad's to see how he was doing. Gary would cook and shop for him, take him to doctor's

appointments and investigate alternative housing options, such as assisted living.

"I was a caregiver, but felt like a juggler trying to figure out where to put dad," Crites says. "I had to make difficult decisions about whether dad could manage at home, with help from family and friends, or whether he needed a nursing home, acute or hospice care."

This was all very time consuming, and Gary wasn't getting a lot of sleep. "There aren't enough hours in the day to do it all," he says.

Crites is one of 44 million Americans engaged in the care of an older loved one, of which 60 percent of them are working, according to a report, "Caregivers In The U.S.: Findings From the National Survey of Caregivers, 2005." These family caregivers struggle to balance their work and elder care obligations. This juggling act often negatively affects a worker's health, family and social life, finances and results in lost productivity at work.

In Crites' case, he had more flexibility than most working caregivers because he runs his own company. Despite this flexibility, caregivers can still experience significant stress and guilt.

*"There aren't enough hours in the day to do it all."* — Gary Crites

"You have to grapple with feelings that you haven't done enough," he says. "Should I have gone to visit dad every day? Would that have prevented his illness?"

"You can't control it all; there are just too many variables, so you get to a point of acceptance and appreciate what you could give," he says. "When I was young, dad bought me shoes; I had the opportunity to reciprocate, and buy him shoes, too."

Caregiving is often associated with women, but according to a MetLife study, "Sons at Work," 40 percent of caregivers are men. Male caregivers like Crites, perform the same functions as female caregivers such as cleaning and cooking, with the exception of personal care. Women are more likely than men to help their loved ones with bathing and dressing. "Men shouldn't get a free pass on caregiving; they are as capable and sensitive as females," Crites says. "There's equal opportunity caregiving whether men take up the banner or not; they're doing it," he says.

## AGING BOOMERS

As baby boomers and their parents continue to age, the number of caregivers in the workforce will grow, placing burdens on both employers and employees. Employers

## 10 signs of a stressed out caregiver

If you recognize yourself in the following, then you might be a stressed out working caregiver. If you are:

1. Exhausted and irritable
2. Often absent from work
3. Often late to work or having to leave early
4. Having difficulty concentrating and feeling distracted
5. Experiencing a loss of productivity
6. Paying less attention to details
7. Having difficulty making decisions
8. Feeling depressed and withdrawn from co-workers
9. Handing in incomplete work assignments
10. Accident prone

— Leah Dobkin



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are finding that caregiving demands increase turnover and absenteeism, early retirement and health care costs.

In the aggregate, employee caregivers cost U.S. industries \$33.6 billion annually in lost productivity, according to the MetLife study. This study also revealed that there is a significant cost to caregivers in lost wages, pension and Social Security.

Despite these costs, most employers and employees underestimate, or completely deny the growing negative impact family caregiving has at work. Many caregivers feel that it is simply inappropriate to talk about their personal or family life at work.

Caregiving is an emotionally laden, very personal experience, according to Diane Piktialis, work life product director for Ceridian, a company that provides employee assistance and work life programs to employers.

Piktialis says there are complex feelings about the person you are caring for as well as siblings, and other relatives who may or may not be helping out. She adds that role reversals (child becomes parent and parent becomes child), family histories and confronting your relatives' or your own mortality, make it very uncomfortable for employees to raise caregiver issues at work.

Employee caregivers often say they are reluctant to talk about caregiving/work conflicts, or have difficulty getting supervisors to understand the problems they face. For example, Pat Bruce, from Milwaukee County's Family Caregiver Support Network, says that one of her clients told her supervisor that she could not come to work for a few days because she had lice. In actuality, she was afraid to tell her supervisor that she needed to travel to Illinois to pick up her mother, who just had a stroke and needed her care.

Caregivers do not self-identify. The term "caregiver" is foreign to many and although workers may be caring for older relatives, they don't realize they are caregivers. Nor do they realize that there are millions of other employee caregivers just like themselves. Mix in the fear of aging and its negative associations, guilt and denial, and one can see why workers are not talking about caregiving at the water fountain.

## AWARENESS AND ACTION

In a 2004 survey of the 510 employees at Waukesha County Technical College, 65 percent of workers indicated they were concerned about aging parents. As a result of this finding, WCTC started an Aging Parents Support Group, which meets bimonthly at lunch to discuss various issues related to caregiving, such as power of attorney, adult day

## Make things better

The following tips can help you improve your situation:

1. Take the 10 Warning Signs quiz (p. 67) to better assess your stress level.
2. Assess your situation at home and at work, and determine what you need.
3. Learn about local resources.
4. Research your company or organization's policies, programs and benefits that could help ease the burden.
5. Make suggestions to your company on ways to make the work environment more "caregiver-friendly."
6. Talk with your supervisor and negotiate and monitor an individualized caregiver/work balance plan.
7. Join a broad coalition of caregiver supporters.

— Leah Dobkin

care and Alzheimer's disease. Some months there are speakers; other months members share personal stories, wisdom and support. According to Lynn Herrmann, a human resource specialist, the college also offers a seven day per year family illness policy, during which employees are allowed to take time off — with pay — to take care of an older or sick relative.

Judy Veigh, an administrative assistant at the college, has benefited from these programs. Her mother had back surgery that turned into a severe staph infection that required nursing home care. During that time, Veigh's father's prostate cancer returned, and he also needed her care. Her supervisor allowed her to work a four-day work week, so she could travel the 90 miles up north Fridays to care for her father, and visit her mother in the nursing home. She would return Sunday night, and her sister would take over the care Monday through Thursday. They retained this schedule until their father passed away.

Veigh's mother regained her health, and returned to her home, but a few years later she developed pneumonia. Veigh was able to use her vacation days to help her mother recover. Eventually, her mother agreed to move to Waukesha County to make it easier for Veigh to care for her.

Caregiving didn't stop there for Veigh. Her mother-in-law, who lived in Florida, suffered a severe stroke. She and her husband brought her mother-in-law back to their home. Veigh and her husband took leave from work to care for her. This was done through flex time, personal time, family illness time and vacation. "They were the most rewarding days of my life; we were able to provide the love and care that made my mother-in-law's last days comfortable with Hospice's help and my employer's support," Veigh says.

## SANDWICH GENERATION

Sometimes family caregivers are referred to as the "sandwich generation," but the increasing numbers of baby boomers have evolved to what could be called the "club sandwich generation." They are faced with the unique generational challenge of not only working, taking care of their children and their parents, but caring for their grandparents, and sometimes their grandchildren as well.

In the 1970s and 1980s, child care was growing as an important business and social issue. Now offering elder care benefits and other related work-life programs have given businesses a competitive edge, critical in an era of increasing labor shortages. Forward-thinking employers throughout the United States are offering programs and policies that create "care-giver-friendly" work environments, empower employees and managers to negotiate individualized work life balance plans, and partner with community-based services that help older people and their caregivers.



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- Family Caregiver Support Network of Interfaith Older Adults Programs  
Pat Bruce (414) 220-8600  
www.caregiversupportnetwork.org
- Milwaukee County Department on Aging, ElderLink (414) 289-6874  
aging\_webinfo@milwaukeecounty.com  
www.milwaukee.gov/county/aging
- Southeastern Wisconsin Area Agency on Aging  
Lynn Dyer (877) 333- 0202  
www.agingresource.com
- Ozaukee County Aging Services  
Jan Braby (262) 284-8120  
www.co.ozaukee.wi.us/aging
- Waukesha County Department of Senior Services  
Judie Berthelsen (262) 548-7836, (262) 548-7828  
http://senior.waukeshacounty.gov/default.htm
- Washington County Office on Aging/Department of Social Service Aging and Disability  
Kathy Beimborn (877) 306-3030  
www.co.washington.wi.us/washington/department.jsp?dept=AGE
- Stowell Associates SelectStaff Inc.  
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www.elderselectstaff.com
- Wisconsin Alliance for Family Caregiving  
Mary Brytnell Peterson (608) 262-8083  
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Glaucoma can occur at any age and in any ethnic group, but is even more likely if you have a family member with glaucoma. Early detection is key in preventing vision loss. Dr. Kalenak urges you to get your vision checked by a professional once a year.

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