

Identity, Martyrdom, and Surviving the Sandwich Generation

July 16, 2026
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July is National Sandwich Generation Month. For those of us “in it”, it is a time to acknowledge the nearly 70 million of us simultaneously caring for aging parents while still raising children, supporting adult children, or both. While conversations about the Sandwich Generation often focus on the practical challenges of caregiving, finances, legal documents, and time management, there is another issue that receives far less attention: the gradual shift of identity.

During my recent conversation with Jonathan Fields, host of the [Good Life Project podcast](#), we explored something I see every day in my law practice and experience in my own life. Long before the legal documents, the estate plans, and the difficult healthcare decisions, there is a deeply personal transformation taking place. The roles that once defined us begin to shift, often without our realizing it.

There emerges a realization that you are no longer simply someone's child. You have become their decision-maker.

Their advocate.

Their organizer.

Their emergency contact.

The one everyone calls when something goes wrong.

And, at the very same time, your children need you in ways every bit as demanding. Younger children need your time, attention, and physical care. Indeed, our older children still need us, and often their problems become bigger, more expensive, and emotionally much more complicated.

Somewhere in the middle of caring for everyone else, many begin to wonder where they went. I know I did.

The identity crisis of the Sandwich Generation is rarely dramatic. It happens gradually. It is built one doctor's appointment at a time. One delayed carpool line that derailed yoga class. One PTA meeting that replaced a celebratory meeting with a client. One tension-filled conversation with your sibling that ruined date night with your spouse. One telephone call with a health insurance company about a denial leaving you \$2,500 poorer than anticipated. One appointment with the lawyer talking about dying and disability. One weekend spent cleaning out a parent's home instead of brunch with your girlfriends.

The accumulation of responsibility slowly crowds out the person you used to be.

Many caregivers tell me they no longer recognize themselves. The career they once loved has taken a back seat. Friendships have become difficult, if not impossible, to maintain. Hobbies disappear. Vacations feel impossible. Their calendars become filled with everyone else's obligations until there is no space left for their own.

Even more confounding is that our society *celebrates* self-sacrifice. We praise the caregiver who "does it all." We admire the proverbial selfless daughter who smiles, nods, and never complains. We applaud the parent who always puts everyone else first.

What we rarely discuss is the cost of this martyrdom.

The emotional exhaustion of caregiving and being everything to everyone is not a story of physical fatigue or a time-management problem to solve. Rather, it is the gradual erosion of the parts of ourselves that provide us with a sense of self-before-caregiving eclipsed our identity.

As an estate planning attorney, I meet families during moments of transition. Parents are aging. Adult children are stepping into new responsibilities. Difficult conversations are happening around illness, incapacity, and mortality. While my role is to help families prepare for the legal and logistical aspects of this transition, I learned that the legal planning is the easiest part.

The harder work is bearing witness to it all and helping families acknowledge that everyone involved is experiencing change.

The parent is struggling with identity and the erosion of their independence, too.

The adult child is struggling with a role reversal and becoming the decision-maker.

Neither role feels comfortable.

The result is grief in both directions.

One of the most surprising aspects of the Sandwich Generation is that these identity shifts occur during what many expected would be their most rewarding years of adulthood. After decades spent building careers and raising families, many imagine they will finally have the freedom to focus on themselves.

Instead, we discover that a second chapter of caregiving is just beginning. It becomes clear that the time to focus on oneself is really just an elusive goal.

This is why planning matters.

Planning is not just about the documents. It is about establishing clarity before the crisis. When families have conversations early, appoint decision-makers, organize important information, and communicate their wishes and expectations, they reduce unnecessary stress during already emotional moments in the future. They avoid family conflict and even fractures.

Planning cannot eliminate the sadness of watching a parent age or the speed at which your children grow up. It can, however, mitigate the chaos that often accompanies it. Equally important is recognizing that preserving your own identity is not selfish. It is essential.

The best caregivers are not the ones who never ask for help. They are the ones who understand that they cannot pour endlessly from an empty cup. They make space for friendships. They protect small moments that belong only to them. They allow themselves to say no without guilt. They allow themselves to grieve, and they remember that they are more than the sum of their responsibilities.

The good news is that the blurred identity of those of us in the Sandwich Generation is not permanent: perhaps that is the

greatest lesson of the Sandwich Generation. We are constantly becoming new versions of ourselves. We are no longer the children our parents once raised, nor are we only the parents raising our own children.

We are translators and conduits between generations.

We are witnesses, preserving our family stories, lore, and history.

We are advocates fiercely protecting our loved ones.

We are decision-makers, making difficult choices with love, respect, and compassion.

These roles are important, meaningful, and sometimes all-consuming, but they do not have the power to replace the person shouldering these roles.

As we recognize Sandwich Generation Month, I encourage you to ask yourself a simple question: Who am I outside of the people who need me?

The answer may not be obvious. It may bloom and float to the surface after you take the time to rediscover interests that have been put on hold or dreams that have been postponed. Making space for that question is one of the most meaningful investments you can make—not just for yourself, but for the people who depend on your well-being. Because the strongest caregivers are not the ones who are relegated to the roles within the Sandwich; they are the ones who remember that they are their own selves first.

Your identity is worth protecting.