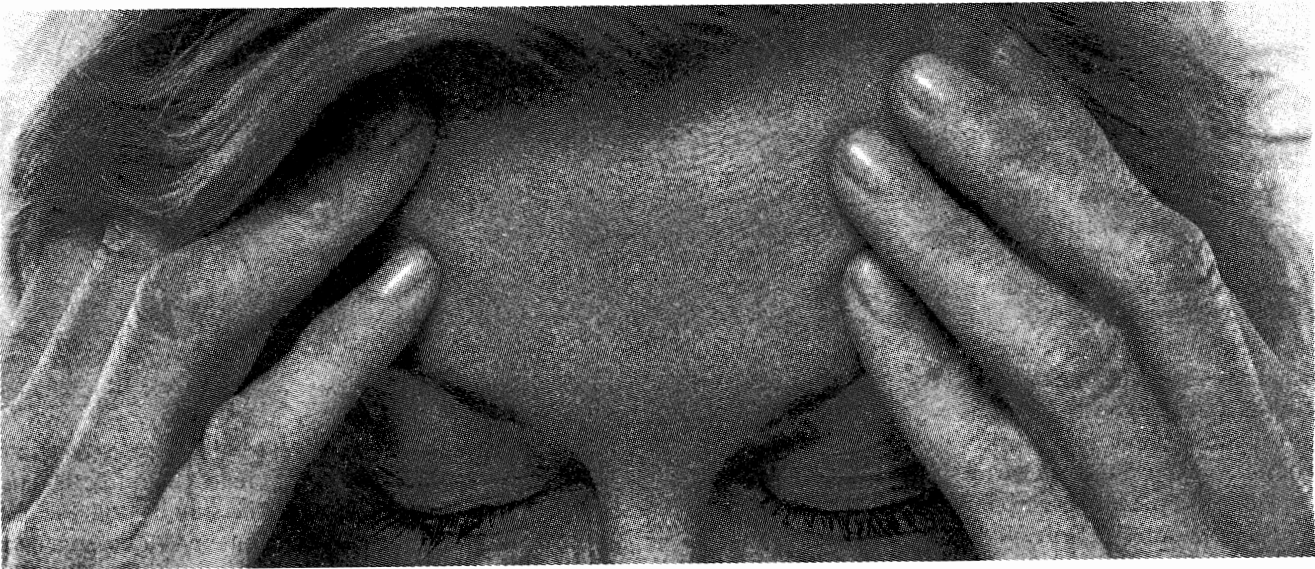


## Stress management for the menopausal woman

Stress builds as “sandwiched women” take on the multifold responsibilities of helping aging parents and raising kids or pursuing a career. Physical activity, good sleep habits, some moments of relaxation, can help reduce the tension.



*You feel like a juggler in a circus and put your own basic self-care on hold.*

### Lois Glover



**W**hen my father became ill a few years ago, I experienced first-hand one of the main problems I see everyday as a menopause practitioner for women: stress. Between balancing my full-time job and driving across the city most nights to ensure my father was getting the care he needed, I felt like a juggler in a circus. I spent so much time taking care of others that I felt like I

had no time to take care of myself. I wasn't sleeping well, I wasn't exercising, my hot flashes were increasing and I was scrambling to hold my life together.

I'm not the only one who has been in this position, however. More than two million Canadian adults are acting as caregivers for their parents. And many of these people are women, with their own families to care for. With so many women getting caught between trying to take care of aging parents and juggling kids, or a career, it's no wonder women in this “sandwich generation” are putting their basic self-care on hold.

#### Take a brisk walk

Numerous women seen at the Mature Women's Centre are struggling with both menopausal symptoms and caregiving responsibilities. They are not eating well, sleeping well, or exercising. Smoking or alcohol intakes may have increased. This unhealthy lifestyle can affect a woman's concentration, memory and performance at her job, resulting in even more stress. This stress often leads to poor mood, relationship troubles, and difficulty in managing menopause symptoms like hot flashes.

While there is no magic pill that will eliminate stress entirely for “sandwiched women”, there are ways to reduce the amount of stress in their lives and to manage stress more effectively. A healthier lifestyle will also help women to better manage their transition through menopause.

Self care is an important part of stress management. High stress levels over a period of time increases blood pressure, and heart rate. And untreated high blood pressure can lead

to kidney disease, stroke or even death. Regular physical activity reduces stress levels and blood pressure, and decreases the frequency and severity of hot flashes. A brisk 30 minute walk most days of the week will also improve sleep and mood.

While hormone fluctuations can be a contributing factor when a woman experiencing menopause feels poorly, sometimes unhealthy lifestyles can escalate menopause symptoms. Women should also watch their alcohol and caffeine intake. Beverages containing alcohol and caffeine can disrupt sleep and make hot flashes worse. Smoking will worsen the hot flashes as well. Developing good sleep habits will improve our symptoms too.

It is important for women to make time for themselves – everyday. The first step is to stop for a moment and re-evaluate your priorities. Sometimes this may require some creative time shifting or dropping other commitments for a while. Whether you practice meditation or yoga, listen to music or simply take time to have fun, making time for yourself will give you an opportunity to de-stress and bring a sense of calmness and balance to your hectic schedule.

#### Let others help

I was lucky I had information on stress management, access to a vehicle, a flexible job, financial stability and people to talk to and support me. Many women don't. Women in the sandwich generation should find out what their stress triggers are and explore the many resources available to help lighten the load of caregiving. For some, it might be helpful to check out the web and consider the information on several sites. It is important for women to realize that in order to take care of others they must take care of themselves.

Resetting priorities allowed me an opportunity to spend the time I needed with my father, to be at his bedside and to say goodbye to a very remarkable man. I miss him dearly. I am now back to walking regularly, and frequently reflect on my many blessings. My hot flashes are better, too. Thanks Dad, and Happy Father's Day.

*Lois Glover is a menopause practitioner in the Mature Women's Centre at Victoria General Hospital. The centre provides a range of services utilizing a nurse-managed, interdisciplinary team approach, with an emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention.*