

# Men adjust to caring for aging parents

## Many male baby boomers take on role unfamiliar to their fathers

By John Leland

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Peter Nicholson serves breakfast to his mother, Bernice, recently at her home in West Hollywood, Calif. Nicholson, 53, is part of a growing number of men who are providing primary care for their aging parents. MONICA ALMEIDA – THE NEW YORK TIMES PHOTO

When Peter Nicholson's mother suffered a series of strokes last winter, he did something women have done for generations: He quit his job and moved into her West Hollywood home to care for her full time.

Since then, he has lost 45 pounds and developed anemia, in part because of the stress, and he is running out of money. But the hardest adjustment, Nicholson said, has been the emotional toll.

“The single toughest moment,” he said, “was when she said to me, ‘And now who are you?’ My whole world just dropped. That was the pinnacle of despair.”

Nicholson, 53, is one of a growing number of men providing primary care for aging parents, usually their mothers. The Alzheimer's Association and the National Alliance for Caregiving estimate that men make up nearly 40 percent of family care providers now, up from 19 percent in a 1996 study by the Alzheimer's Association. About 17 million men are caring for an adult.

“It used to be that when men said, ‘I’ll always take care of my mother,’ it meant, ‘My wife will always take care of my mother,’” said Carol Levine, director of the families

and health care project at the United Hospital Fund. “But now, more and more men are doing it.”

Often they face employers, friends, support organizations and even parents who view caregiving as an essentially female role. Male caregivers are more likely to say they feel unprepared for the role and become socially isolated, and less likely to ask for help.

Women still provide the bulk of family care, especially for intimate tasks like bathing and dressing. In support groups, which are predominantly made up of women, many women complain that their brothers are treated like heroes just for showing up.

But with smaller families and more women working full time, many men must take on roles that would have been alien to their fathers. Just as fatherhood grew more hands-on in the baby boom generation, so has the role for many sons as their generation's parents age.

Nicholson said his family hadn't discussed who would care for his mother, Bernice, if she grew frail. But as the unmarried child among his two siblings, and the one most readily available, he'd spent more time with her as she aged.

Still, he was not prepared for the isolation of full-time care.

"There's absolutely no involvement in the outside world," Nicholson said. "When I finally get out to a Dodgers game, walking to the car, I say, 'Oh, this is what life is about. I forgot about this.' I can't be doing myself any good by not getting out of here."

Isolation affects women, too, but men tend to have fewer lifelines, said Donna Benton, an assistant research professor of gerontology at the University of Southern California and director of the Los Angeles Caregiver Resource Network. Men are less likely to have friends going through similar experiences, and rely more on their jobs for daily human contact.

"That's the harder part for men, to find someone to talk to," Benton said. "It's the emotional side: the guilt, the sadness, the anger. For men it becomes more stressful because they can't talk about it. They feel cut off."

And then there is the inevitable question: What happens when I have to bathe her?

"That's where the rubber meets the road," said Donna Wagner, director of gerontology at Towson University and one of the few researchers who has studied sons as caregivers.

For Nicholson, the whole experience has been a journey into the surreal, but especially at bath time.

Though he is not squeamish about it, he said: "The weirdness permeates our relationship. She doesn't know if I'm her husband or her boyfriend or her neighbor. She knows she trusts me. But there are times when it's very difficult. I need to keep her from embarrassing herself. She'll say things like, 'I adore you.' I don't know who she's loving, because she doesn't know who I am."

Matt Kassin, 51, said he had no role model for male caregiver in his family. His father had been distant; he, in turn, had been the rebellious son.

"I was the son who went through divorce, who needed to separate from my mom when I was teenager," Kassin said. "I'm the son that wanted distance. Now I'm the son who hears every morning, 'It's so nice to hear your voice.'"

On a recent evening, Kassin visited his mother, Doris Golden, in her Manhattan apartment. Golden, 82, is in the early stages of Alzheimer's and still lives independently, but relies on

Kassin to arrange her schedule, pay her bills and make sure she remembers daily tasks (his sister also helps).

“When he was young, I couldn't get him to raise a finger,” Golden said. Her conversation looped repeatedly back to this point, and with each return, Kassin grew more irritated. That was when he was a teenager, he said, sharply; hadn't he been more attentive since?

Finally she looked at him tenderly and asked, “When did I start relying on you?”

Interviewed apart from his mother, Kassin said: “It's kind of like living my nightmare situation. But it's a great opportunity here. Here's the woman who nurtured me. She now is the child. You worry if you're up for the challenge. If I don't make this challenge, what kind of human being am I?”

In past generations, men might have answered by pointing to their accomplishments as breadwinners or fathers. Now, some say they worry about the conflict between caring for their parents and these other roles.

In a 2003 study at three Fortune 500 companies, Wagner found men less likely to use employee-assistance programs because they feared it would be held against them.

“Even though the company has endorsed the program, your supervisors may have a different opinion,” Wagner said. “I had a man who worked for a large company with very generous benefits, and he was told that if he took more time to go with his dad to chemotherapy, he was at risk of losing his job. He ended up not going with his father.”