

Surviving the SANDWICH YEARS



relationship reboot



If your teens were tough, and your 20s like an awkward episode of *Sex and the City*, you might have expected midlife to be a breeze. But coping with adult children's struggles while juggling the needs of elderly parents can test us like never before. Instead of shifting down a gear, we may be faced with our offspring's failure to launch and parents' declining health. Award-winning relationship therapist James Earl (above) advises on the toughest sandwich-year scenarios.

Juggling the needs of grown-up children and ageing parents can be a significant challenge

The boomerang child – plus four!

Q When our youngest left home 15 years ago, my partner and I appreciated the chance to reconnect. Then COVID hit, and he and his wife both lost their jobs and moved back in with us – along with their three under-10s. It's been a year now, and the noise, sticky fingerprints and toys everywhere are trying our patience. How do we tell them we need our space without causing a rift?

A To have your child return home again is difficult at the best of times. Have a conversation, where you tell them that, while they'll always have a home with you, they might like your help in restoring their independence. Do they need help looking for a place? Financial assistance for a deposit? In planning together, you can make this a good experience and, hopefully, get back your own independence.

I'm jealous of her

Q Since our daughter left to take a job in Edinburgh, I've been lost without her. We talk often, but it's nothing like it was. Now, it's become obvious my husband and I have drifted apart. He watches history documentaries, while I scroll through social media, envying all the fun my daughter is having. Should I rent a flat near hers – make a fresh start myself?

A Stay available to your daughter; let her know you're there for her, but let her begin her own journey. Meanwhile, open a conversation with your husband. What do you both want? Be hopeful that relationships can change, and aware that splitting up at just the point your daughter is breaking free might be disturbing for her.

She won't let me help

Q My father died eight years ago and my mother managed well initially, joining a knitting circle that makes blankets for a premature baby unit, and making new friends. Lately, though, her health has deteriorated. When I suggest she needs help, or maybe to move into an assisted-living facility, she brushes it off, refusing to see a GP about the worsening tremor in her hands. How do I get through to her?

A Sometimes a parent can become distressed about their loss of ability but not want to admit it to themselves – or you. If you confront her, she may feel attacked and pull up the drawbridge. Try to have a calm discussion about what she feels she needs now, and in the future, without framing it too obviously in terms of her becoming frail. Ultimately, if a person doesn't want help, you can't force them.

Caring conundrum

Q My husband's parents live nearby and we've always had a good relationship with them, and with his brother, who lives locally, and sister, who lives in Spain. His mother, who is bed-bound after a fall in 2019, was being cared for by my father-in-law until his recent stroke, so we now look after them between us. My husband and I have demanding jobs so we can only help on weekends. I feel close to burnout, guilty we can't do more and resentful that my sister-in-law's not sharing the load.

A I absolutely understand. You can ask your sister-in-law for more help, but that's all you can do. Perhaps you and your husband can look for help from local charities or agencies? Ultimately, this is a question of how much you can reasonably be expected to take on. It's important to take care of yourself, too, otherwise you can't take care of anyone else. I think everyone would acknowledge what a great job you are doing.

I'm worried about my daughter's future

Q My middle child and I used to be like best friends, but when she moved out, everything changed. She's been seeing an older man who's divorced, with kids not much younger than my daughter, and I worry he's having a midlife crisis and using her to bolster his ego. She's doing nothing with her degree, and seems happy coasting along waitressing. I'm terrified she's going to throw away her future.

A It would be strange if you didn't worry about your daughter. We often say to our kids, 'I don't mind what you do, I just want you to be happy', but in fact we can have pretty strong ideas about what would make us happy: a partner of the same age, a good job using the degree, and so on. Talk to your daughter about your legitimate concerns, but try to trust her. It's a cliché, but we can only learn the way by walking the path.

Is it Alzheimer's?

Q My father, who's 70, has always been my rock. Mum died when I was 13 and Dad never remarried. Last Christmas, I noticed he was struggling to remember words and, once, couldn't remember how to turn off his oven. He's since stopped driving. Do these lapses point to him having Alzheimer's?

A It is terribly distressing when we see cognitive decline in someone we love. I'd suggest that, so long as your dad agrees, you request a proper diagnosis via his GP, then at least you both know what you're dealing with.

Even if your worst fears are confirmed, you both may be able to continue your fulfilling relationship, with support.

Next steps...
Find support for caring for elderly relatives at ageuk.org.uk. Looking at ways your child could afford to fly the nest? Check out gov.uk/affordable-home-ownership-schemes for help to buy and shared ownership ideas