# THE CARE GAP: Leading Through the Elder-Care Crisis

## **Melissa Fisher** and **Sherri Snelling** Answers Your Questions

**Q:** ***How can we restructure our team's daily workflows and communication protocols to absorb sudden, unpredictable caregiving emergencies without sacrificing project deadlines?***

**Melissa:**

"My first recommendation is to remove the element of "unpredictability" by treating caregiving emergencies as an expected reality rather than an exception—and building that assumption directly into program and project plans.

In many cases, known factors signal increased risk, even if the timing is uncertain. Creating a safe space during planning discussions allows employees to share relevant caregiving responsibilities, so teams are not caught off guard. Without that transparency, organizations are more likely to be blindsided.

While it's true that no amount of planning can prevent every sudden change in availability, some situations—such as caring for a parent with dementia, Parkinson's, or another chronic condition—are less a matter of if and more a matter of when. Acknowledging this reality enables more proactive planning.

This can include:

- Temporary redistribution of work or flexible role coverage.
- Backup plans with shared access to project materials and documentation.
- Predefined decision points for pausing or adjusting timelines, when feasible.

Regular knowledge transfers and team huddles also help keep work aligned and reduce dependencies on any one individual.

Importantly, this approach strengthens the team even when no emergency occurs—improving continuity, collaboration, and resilience while reducing the risk of missed deadlines."

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**Sherri:**
"I would say Communication and Collaboration are key.

In team dynamics, communicating well by ensuring other team members have access to the documents or data needed to complete the task is crucial. Tools such as Slack, Google Drive, etc., allow any team member to see what is completed or in progress and what is needed so that if one team member is sick, has a caregiving crisis, or has another emergency, another team member or supervisor can more easily step in.

Also, the collaboration of teams is essential. While one person may be assigned a portion of a report or program, they should not work in isolation or without collaboration from other team members. Supervisors need to hold meetings to include remote workers who may be caregiving to ensure that continuity of work is discussed.
Underscoring all of this is an empathetic and emotionally intelligent supervisor or manager who has training in caregiving (parenting and senior care) situations and can easily guide other team members to stay on task despite disruptions.

Caregiving, just like individual health issues (the flu, a broken ankle, etc.), should not be stigmatized in the workplace; it is just another challenge in life. Leaders and co-workers who remain calm and support each other (since so many will be caregivers at some point) are what workplaces need.

While the suggestions above help workers in more traditional 9-to-5 office settings, we must consider shift workers, part-time service, or jobs where immediate replacement may be difficult. Organizations with caregiving benefits, which help the caregiver stay on the job while securing backup emergency care for a loved one, are one way to approach modern workplace challenges."

**Q: *What are the specific legal boundaries, confidentiality requirements, and compliance frameworks (such as the Family and Medical Leave Act [FMLA]or state-specific paid family leave) that govern how I document and accommodate a worker's caregiving constraints?***

**Melissa:**
"I would say Communication and Collaboration are key.

I can't speak in detail about the legal and compliance requirements, but I can share how this is handled in my organization. We use a third-party provider to administer FMLA, which helps ensure compliance and proper documentation. The main exception is state-specific paid family leave programs, which are typically managed directly between the employee and the state.

From an employee experience standpoint, what matters most is clarity and accessibility. Providing a clear, easy-to-find FAQ on your intranet or EAP page is critical. Employees shouldn't have to guess how to navigate these processes. In many cases, FMLA or caregiving leave arises with little warning, and the situation is already stressful. Clear guidance helps reduce that burden and ensures people can act quickly and confidently.

**Sherri:**

"A best practice for organizations is to consider providing access to an onsite or virtual Care Navigator. This caregiving benefit has seen higher utilization rates than contacting HR because employees desire anonymity. There are no reports to HR departments on individual names and situations; only de-identified data on what help was needed and whether it was satisfactory.

Objective outside parties that offer care navigation help employees overcome fears that they'll be deemed less reliable, less productive, and sicker than non-caregiving colleagues.

Care Navigators are experts at guiding employees to useful resources, conducting research on their behalf, and providing trustworthy solutions. Not only do employees spend less time focused on caregiving research and choices, but they also feel there is someone to talk to and guide them through the unknowns of their caregiving journey.

***Q: How do I skillfully address a sudden drop in a caregiver's performance or attendance with compassion, while still maintaining fair and realistic accountability for the rest of the team?***

**Melissa:**

**"**I'd start by challenging the idea that a drop in performance is truly "sudden." If you've created consistent space for open dialogue, you're more likely to see changes coming—or at least understand the context behind them.

From my own experience, regular 1:1 meetings with my director were incredibly valuable. We used that time to talk openly about workload and capacity and problem-solved together. It's not a punitive conversation, it's collaborative. This approach is beneficial beyond caregiving situations and supports all employees.

It can also help us to use a simple check-in document that employees complete ahead of the meeting. This creates structure, surfaces potential challenges early, and guides a more productive conversation. While not specific to caregiving, it allows managers to proactively address anything that impacts performance or attendance.

If the situation truly is unexpected, responding with compassion is key. That includes connecting the employee to available support systems, such as EAP resources or mental health services. And if those supports aren't already in place, this is a strong signal that they should be prioritized.

Ultimately, the goal is to balance empathy with accountability by creating systems that support transparency, shared problem-solving, and continuity for the entire team. "

**Sherri:**
Companies that are serious about creating a "Care Culture" at work need to start with training supervisors and managers (and the C-suite) on caregiving in the workplace. If the training is conducted by a company that understands gerontology (bio/psycho/social health), then it can be inclusive of parenting, senior care, and lifespan caregiving, or what I call "carespan."

Proper training will also flip the script from negative data (lost productivity, increased recruitment and retention costs) to understanding thatt the manager/supervisor role is to educate and support their employees.

These things are vital to the role managers play in meeting KPIs or business goals. By developing empathy and support for caregiving employees, the human element at work becomes as important as the bottom line.

**Q:** ***How can I foster a workplace culture that encourages open, stigma-free dialogue about elder-care challenges across all generations of our workforce?***

**Melissa:**
After you've done the work to understand the makeup of your caregiving workforce, the next step is to create intentional space for ongoing conversation. This can take many forms —such as employee resource groups, community forums, webinars, or guest speakers—but the key is to make it clear that employees are both invited and supported in participating.

Equally important is ensuring that these spaces are not just informational, but participatory. Caregivers should have the opportunity to help shape the conversation and influence what resources or programming are offered.

The more you listen and learn, the better you can tailor your HR and workforce retention strategies to meet their real needs.

It's also important to recognize that caregivers often don't have the time or capacity to organize these efforts themselves. They value employers when they take the initiative—but they still want their voices included and reflected.

**Sherri:**

Make caregiving normalized in the workplace. Achieving this requires consistent (not once a year) communication about caregiving benefits, events, ERGs, etc. Helping all employees understand that at some point, they will be caring for a loved one is important. This is not an "us versus them" situation—we all have a carespan; it just depends on when and for how long.

Also, having someone from the C-suite or other senior leadership people share their caregiving story helps remove the stigma and normalize caregiving, no matter what role you play at your company. Making caregiving employees heroes is the goal. The health care system cannot survive without family caregivers, so we need to applaud these heroes.

Finally, we need to use a new language that underscores the positive aspects of caregiving and its benefits to the workplace rather than the negative elements. Caregiving can enhance the bottom line, not jeopardize it. When policies become practice and caregiving is tied to revenue success, the corporate culture will shift for the better.

**Q:** ***What are some of the long-term effects of caregiving and cumulative stress? What recommendations do you have for former caregivers who are no longer active in that role but still carry many of the emotional, mental, and physical effects of caregiving?***

**Melissa:**

Although I'm still a care partner to my mom, I continue to carry the emotional weight of caring for my aunt and dad, who have both passed. For me, healing has come through channeling that experience into purpose—specifically, volunteering to support others on a similar journey and engaging in advocacy work. Being there for others has been deeply fulfilling.

At the same time, I've recognized the importance of professional support. I continue to prioritize therapy, where I'm working through the trauma that can come with caregiving. My therapist has been instrumental in helping me process feelings like guilt, grief, and resentment. I couldn't do this work without him—or without the mental health support my employer provides.

Physically and mentally, I've also committed to taking care of myself. I carve out consistent "me time," including working out each morning and taking walks at lunch. Setting boundaries—even with my mom—has been essential. These practices have helped me build resilience, improve my health, and begin to rebalance after the intensity of caregiving.

**Sherri:**

While it can be difficult to practice self-care in the midst of your caregiving journey, taking just a few minutes (7 minutes or less) a day for a self-care moment can help you see the important role caregiving plays and reflect on what you learned that can be shared with others. I've had caregivers tell me that it's important not to dismiss the anger, fear, frustration, guilt and grief of caregiving, as those emotions can offer valuable perspective on life and how they support humankind.

Here are ways you can get involved:

- Become a hospice volunteer
- Volunteer at senior centers or assisted living communities to support those who don't have family and may feel alone.
- Become a support group leader or mentor for other caregivers in your workplace.
- Share your stories via social media, like YouTube Shorts or Instagram.

Your spirit of giving does not necessarily end with the passing of your loved one.

***Q: How do you begin to rebalance and adjust to a "new normal" after years of putting your life, emotions, routines, and even personal needs on hold? What are healthy ways to start rebuilding life and identity after caregiving ends?***

**Melissa:**

First, I want to acknowledge this: just because the "title" of caregiver or care partner has ended doesn't mean your need for support goes away.

What you've experienced doesn't just disappear—and you are not alone in feeling this way. I hear this often from caregivers I support.

Rebuilding your sense of self takes time, and community is still essential. I have a few suggestions that may help:

- Stay connected to caregiver communities.
  - Even after caregiving ends, those spaces can feel like home. Organizations like Daughterhood (www.daughterhood.org) offer ongoing support, including weekly "Circles," with options specifically for those whose loved ones have passed. Staying connected to people who understand your experience can be incredibly grounding."

- Consider therapy focused on grief and transition
  - Working with a therapist who specializes in grief can make a meaningful difference. When my dad passed, I found a therapist for my mom who came to her in person and used a structured approach, including a workbook that met her where she was—even with dementia. Many professionals specialize in this area, and finding the right fit can help you process the complex emotions caregiving leaves behind.
- Gently reconnect with your personal life
  - After long periods of isolation, it can be incredibly hard to re-engage socially—but it's important. Try reaching out to trusted friends and being honest about how you're feeling. You might even ask them to keep inviting you, even if you're hesitant at first. I needed that after my dad passed. It was hard, and I resisted—but over time, those small steps (walks, coffee, dinner) helped me reconnect.

Most importantly, be patient with yourself. This isn't something that resolves quickly. You are, in many ways, rediscovering who you are outside of caregiving—and that's a process. I'm still in that process myself. I don't have all the answers, but I do know that healing is possible with support, intention, and time. I truly wish you the best—I understand how incredibly hard this is.

**Sherri:**

This is such an important question. Your role has been focused on caring for someone else, and now it is quiet, and you aren't sure how to fill your days. It is not unlike empty nesters who wonder, "What do I do next?"

My first suggestion is to practice self-care since there are no time constraints now!

- Get outside and watch the sunset with coffee, tea or your favorite cocktail.
- Get a massage, pedicure, or take a long bath.
- Stay active: ride your bike, play a round of golf, take a walk, or do whatever activity you enjoy. Activities that get you moving but aren't too strenuous can help you "move" in different ways and get your brain out of repeated cycles.
- Socialize with others when you're ready. There is no timeframe for this; you'll know when the time is right to talk about your loved one. Call friends you couldn't see as much and meet up for a meal.
- Take a class! What have you always wanted to learn? This is your time, so relish it and do it in real life rather than online. In my book, Me Time Monday, you need oxytocin to survive, and we only get this release when we are close to others, staring into their eyes, watching facial expressions, getting a hug, or touching their back or hand.

In life, when we suffer a loss (a marriage, a job, a loved one), we go through the 5 Stages of Grief (Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance). Many caregivers can start these stages at diagnosis and then go through the 5 stages again after the loved one passes. But now we talk about the 6th Stage of Grief: finding meaning. This is where you explore what the caregiving journey is all about. How do you find meaning from it that informs the rest of your life, and how do you find a new reason to live? What is your passion and purpose with the days you have left? That is your new journey. Enjoy! .

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