

Parent Care: The Latest, Greatest Challenge for Baby Boomers excerpt from speech 8 May 2003 at the [Empire Club of Canada](#)

Madam President, distinguished head table guests, members of the Empire Club, ladies and gentlemen... for years I listened to important speakers stand at this podium and express what an honour it was to address the club. I never imagined I would be standing here to share my thoughts with you. But I am, and I am sincerely honoured by the opportunity.

I am still a bit overwhelmed by John Wright's intense tour of the landscape of Canadian's concerns and expectations about eldercare. His data sets off flashing yellow lights of caution and alarming red lights of concern.

He's provided a vivid snapshot of the myriad issues facing all of us boomers who have aging parents.

Our parents. Our links with the past, and our passports to the future. The people who got us from infancy into adulthood, regardless of how well we think they accomplished that. The very ones who, as they age and start to falter, now need us. Need our help and support.

But guess what--no one and no system has taught us or prepared us for parent care.

We learned about childcare; most of us attended prenatal and parenting classes and got both welcomed and unsolicited advice from our families and even friends.

But being a parent to our children was an intimate involvement in the progression of life--watching them expand and extend their universe and skills and minds. Parent care, though, is a process of regression--watching our parents' universe contract and witnessing their physical and mental decay.

So here we are on a journey of discovery. A journey we never planned to take. A journey like no other we've ever experienced.

It's a trip of joy and hurt, of anxiety and personal growth, filled with uncertainty.

It's all about watching how time is taking its toll on our parents. And there isn't a single thing that we can do to stop or even slow down the march of time and its consequences.

We used to need help walking, and now our parents do. They used to take us to the hospital emergency room in the middle of the night, and now we take them. We couldn't construct well-formed thoughts, and now our parents can't. We were once in diapers, and now many of our parents are.

And as we become absorbed by this role reversal, every step of the way we are having to learn new coping and adapting skills.

And it's not easy.

In fact, it can be rather frightening and it is most certainly intimidating.

On this journey, we'll discover many new things about ourselves and all those close to us. In some cases, we will find the kind of support we so much need. And in some cases, we'll be bitterly disappointed by the ambivalence of those from whom we expected sensitivity and caring.

And for this journey, I suggest to you that there are a number of guiding principles that can help us navigate our way through the maze of personal challenges we'll face. Let me share six of those principles with you--principles I have learned from a decade of escalating personal experience and from so many others who have found themselves likewise immersed in parent care.

Let me start with three principles with respect to our parents:

1. Slow everything down. Their sense of time and our sense of time are now running at very different velocities. Move more slowly to accommodate their slowing speed. Speak more slowly to accommodate their sluggish ability to comprehend. Understand that our parents will take twice as long to do something or to think about something or even to express something. They'll sense and internalize our impatience, and they'll react to it with a deep, inner emotion of angst and even anger. So, patience should be our watchword.

2. Treat parents with dignity and respect; their sense of independence is sacred. We can't take them for granted and should never underestimate their need to feel like they are an important and valued part of our busy lives. As long as they are able to make sound and safe decisions, we must respect those decisions. We must not "take over" just because we think they can't do the right things or because we believe we can do things better. Our aging parents want to feel in control and independent, even when they're not. So be very sensitive to their unexpressed frustration that they're now frail and failing. The day they must stop driving will be a turning point in their sense of self-confidence. The move to an assisted living or nursing facility will be another major watershed in their lives. The first fall will signal a defining moment in their decline. And each epic event will demand that we come to terms with their personal fears.

3. Stay close to health-care providers and ask lots of questions. Geriatric medicine is growing and maturing at a rapid pace. Our health system is doing ever more to address eldercare. But in reality, the fact is that unless we advocate on behalf of our parents, they may simply get lost in the system. That's why we should ask lots of questions. Why are we taking this course of action? Why can't we try that? How does this medication interact with that one? How can we get physiotherapy for my mother? How can we get my father into a

seniors' social group? Should we have another opinion on this? Ask, ask and ask. And keep records of what is being done with and for your parents.

And now, three principles for yourself:

1. Plan ahead. My day job is all about crisis and issues management and communications. What we tell clients is that it isn't a question of "if" they'll have crises or issues, but rather, when and how large. In the same sense, it's not a question of if our parents will become frail and ill and eventually die, but when and how. So as difficult as it is to initiate these conversations, I urge you to talk to your parents while they are still mentally sound. Talk to them about their own future expectations and needs and desires, right through to end-of-life decisions. This means putting in place everything from power of attorney to living wills, from knowing how and where they've structured their finances to deciding which sibling will take a lead role in their care. Believe me, please, there are so many things to decide and consider. And these decisions are sounder when the family plans ahead. In the state of emotion that accompanies a crisis very few decisions will be good ones.

2. Find day-to-day balance in your own life. As our parents continue in their inevitable decline, recognize that the pressures on you will increase. We'll have to do more for them while still trying to spend time with our spouse and children. And still doing our job at peak performance. And still enjoying some semblance of a social life. And even finding some "me" time. All to say: we need to strive to balance our lives and the demands on it through the years of escalating parent care. Sure, we need to help and support our parents, but not at the cost of our other important relationships, or our own well-being. So you need to plan how to balance your own life. Some enlightened organizations have support programs in place. For example, our sponsor today, GlaxoSmithKline, is the first Canadian company to launch an extended paid leave for

employees caring for terminally ill family members or for dealing with other critical family situations. And then, consider how you can continue to support your parents without shorting out yourself. My co-author, Dr. Michael Gordon, taught me that if I become ill from the stress of parenting my parents, I won't be good for anything or to anyone.

3. Dump the guilt. From the thousands of people I've spoken to during the past year in church basement meetings, on radio talk shows, and at social gatherings, the hot button that consistently emerges is guilt. Guilt about not doing enough for our parents. I suggest to you that there are two kinds of guilt associated with parent care. There is inflicted guilt. That's the guilt dump we get from our

parents. It's when they say things like, "If you really cared about us, you'd be here more often." Inflicted guilt is our parents' way of trying to reel us in to help them face their fears and insecurities and needs. It's their way of trying to exercise their fading reigns of control and continue to connect with us. The other kind of guilt is self-induced. It's when we try to second-guess ourselves. It's when we spend a lot of time wondering what we did or didn't do right, what we should or could have done, and what we ought to do next and why. Let me tell you something. Dump the guilt. If you can look at yourself in a mirror and state with absolute certainty that you're doing the best you can for your parents, then there is no reason to feel guilty. And doing the best will be a different and very personal definition for each one of us.

So, ladies and gentlemen, there is nothing simple or easy about this journey of discovery.

Our resilience will be tested time and again. There will be drama and trauma we can't even imagine.

That's all the more reason to plan ahead. It's not easy, but it is essential.

However, that's just one piece in the complex jigsaw puzzle of eldercare, and self care.

The challenges we face are very personal. Yet we share similar experiences that transcend our families, and span provincial boundaries and language and culture and politics.

John's polling numbers speak for themselves. Now we boomers must speak out on the issue. We must unify our voices in passion and persuasion.

I echo John's call for dialogue--dialogue that starts in our homes and reaches across the country.

I have been parenting my parents for a decade. I've co-authored a book about it. But I'm just one voice. And I'd like to see millions more voices join in a national chorus of concern about the two distinct aspects of eldercare. One is about the safety, dignity, comfort and quality of care every single aging Canadian deserves. The other is about the understanding and support we, who are now parenting our parents, so very much need.

I believe the time has come to create a national council of government, private sector and not-for-profit organizations--a council charged with exploring and establishing responsible policies and realistic procedures that deliver the support desperately needed by the elderly and increasingly needed by the adult children who are now so involved in their care.

Because while parent care starts at home, its consequences impact every government and every company and, inevitably, every one of us.

Thank you for your attention.