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# Family comes first, even if it means fudging truth

By SUSAN PINKER

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

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**Dear Susan,** I am an excellent employee. But I am also the sole caregiver of my aging parents and attend all of their medical appointments. At work, nobody says anything if those with children need to leave early, come in late or take a day off. But when I book time to look after my parents, my manager asks me to make up for it - which employees with children are not expected to do. This is unfair but HR does not want to get involved. I was told it is up to the discretion of each manager. My boyfriend says I should just say I have medical appointments for his children instead. We have been together three years and they are a big part of my life. I don't want to lie, but what else can I do?

*-Anonymous*

**Dear Anonymous,** Do whatever is necessary to look after your parents. Yes, that means fudging the truth if your back is to the wall.

As our society does such a hit-and-miss job of caring for its seniors, the onus of co-ordinating care often falls on adult children, necessitating touchy trade-offs. And in my view - and the view of an ethicist I consulted - fragile family members come first.

"If a firm is so inflexible as to force people into untruths in order to be able to carry out their obligations to their parents, then the ethical fault lies with the firm, rather than with the employee," affirmed Daniel Weinstock, the director of the Centre for Ethics Research at the University of Montreal.

You clearly feel your responsibilities keenly, to your aging parents, as well as to your work. Most managers understand that putting the thumb screws to employees already stretched thin by the needs of ill family members scuttles their long-term loyalty. If you can't persuade your manager that having some control over your schedule is beneficial to both parties, then it is okay to lie about who, exactly, requires your help.

But exhaust all other options before bending the truth. Start with investigating whether you are entitled to any leave time for family responsibilities.

Five out of 10 provinces allow up to 10 days of partially paid or unpaid leave a year in order to take care of family members, including Ontario, British Columbia, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and Quebec, according to Nora

Spinks, the president of Work-Life Harmony Enterprises, an international labour consulting firm in Toronto.

"Where there is the most support and flexibility is in small workplaces, where people bend and stretch to cover each other," she said, adding most large companies also have policies that allow people to care for sick or aging family members.

Mid-sized companies are the toughest. If you work in one, investigate whether any policies apply to you and if any managers have been supportive. Any precedents, and the ability to persuade managers that flexibility can help both of you, might help.

Some background might be of interest in convincing your workplace that this is not just your problem.

More than one in four working Canadians is caring for elderly relatives, and this proportion will only balloon as boomers age, according to a study published early this year by business professor Linda Duxbury and her colleagues at Carleton University.

Yet, public policy is patchy, and, in most cases, lags behind the support that many companies offer employees. "The interesting thing is that the child of an elderly relative has a legal obligation to provide care. Whether it's financial, medical or legal, they [companies] have an obligation under the law to provide the necessary support to their employees, the way they would with jury duty," Ms. Spinks said.

Still, as you've discovered, the topic of eldercare is often taboo - much the way childcare was two decades ago, when a dead car battery was considered a more credible reason for being late to work than a sick babysitter, she noted.

And even though we're obligated by law, not to mention basic moral standards, to look after aging relatives who need our care, for the time being, except for collective agreements or employers who guarantee it, there is no legal protection for those who take risks to fulfill these responsibilities. Currently, it is not considered discriminatory to offer generous benefits to parents of small children that are not available to employees with other, equally serious family duties.

So if you decide to say it's your stepchildren, rather than your parents, who need you at the doctor's office, be prepared, if questioned, to mount a passionate defence of the reason for your actions, and face any fallout from uncomprehending managers.

Whether for an appointment with an obstetrician, a pediatrician or a geriatrician, family caregivers are most likely to be female. According to a national survey published in 2007, women are providing about 80 per cent of the care that Canadians with long-term conditions need. Their contribution amounts to more than \$5-billion of unpaid labour a year.

So if family members like you didn't feel a sense of duty, who would step in? Employers - and families - who do not address this question will face increasing absenteeism, if not Dilbert-like apathy among employees, and especially women, who are now using their own vacation time and savings to do what seems right.

The problem will only escalate. A recent report by the Alzheimer Society projects a dementia epidemic that will increase the number of informal, unpaid hours of care by a factor of three in three decades, placing a "crippling burden" on families, according to David Harvey of the Alzheimer Society of Canada.

Before you start burning through your vacation days, and before lying, try to convince your managers that the ability to care for fragile family members of any age is what permits you to focus on your work and invest in it.

"What we know from research is that the prime relationship is with your manager," Ms. Spinks said. "He or she's the one to tell that your mother or father is not well, that you need to be on call."

What happens if no one hears this message? Frank discussions of how specific companies deal with this issue are

available on Twitter or Facebook, she said. "There's no way you can quit your mom. But you can quit your job."

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of [The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap](#). Her blog, on the science of human relationships can be found at [www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-open-mind](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-open-mind). Send questions to: [spinker@globeandmail.com](mailto:spinker@globeandmail.com) [[spinker@globeandmail.com](mailto:spinker@globeandmail.com)].*

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