As baby boomers age, many are finding it hard to imagine that they are, in fact, getting older. The generation that gave us the phrase “Don’t trust anyone over 30” is now well on the other side of that milestone. And while some are handling the aging process with grace, others are fighting it every step of the way.

Regardless of how old baby boomers think they are, the passage of time does cause both physical and mental changes. It also causes a shift in responsibilities, most notably for boomers who are no longer “children of the 60s,” but are instead caregivers for elderly parents.

“Of the biggest issues that boomers are struggling with is how to allow aging parents to remain as independent as they can be, but still provide them with caregivers for elderly parents,” explained Kristy Wright, president and CEO, VNA (Visiting Nurses Association) of Western Pennsylvania and author of the book If I Were an Only Child. “In the previous generation, aging parents more often than not moved in with their kids, but boomers are not as accepting of this; they want to take care of their parents, but they don’t want to live with them.

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“You’re still a child to your parents, even if you’re in your 50s,” she added. “And because boomers tend to be ‘get it done’ types, they may try to make decisions for parents without involving the parents in their decisions, which can make parents dig in their heels.”

Boomers are the most resilient generation that has ever been.”

Kristy Wright

Being a caregiver to aging parents, and often to their own children as well, can cause boomers a lot of stress, according to Stefanie Small, LCSW, a geriatric social worker for Jewish Family & Children’s Service of Pittsburgh, an organization that helps older adults remain safe and comfortable in their own homes by providing care coordination, caregiver services, in-home counseling, support groups, family consultation, information and referrals. “As the sandwich generation, baby boomers often have two sets of people to take care of,” Small said. “The good news is that unlike earlier generations, most boomers are very good about planning; they don’t wait for a crisis to deal with it. We get a lot of calls from boomers who say that mom or dad is alright now, but they know it won’t always be that way, so they want to know what their resources are ahead of time.”

Wright adds that creating a ‘family council’ can also help reduce stress. “Figure out what each person can do and what resources they have,” she said. “Some family members can contribute time or money; others may commit to making sure that mom or dad gets to doctors’ appointments. You have to take into consideration what each person is able to do—not what you think he or she should do. Be accepting of what others bring to the table and you can make it work.”

A lot of anxiety that boomers feel as they age revolves around medical issues, especially in this time of ever-changing health reform. “Boomers today are anxious about the future in ways that former generations were not,” said Small. “Will they be able to access the healthcare that they thought they could expect? Will they be able to retire and cruise the world, and now the money’s not there? They thought the Dow would never drop.”

According to Small, even those boomers who are lucky enough to retire may find themselves becoming sad or depressed. “Boomers are at the age when they are looking back and asking themselves, ‘Did I accomplish everything I wanted to do?’ and ‘How much more time do I have to do what I set out to do?’ While these people may not be clinically depressed, they are feeling blue. “People often feel like they have no identity once they’ve retired if their lives were wrapped up in their jobs,” she continued. “They need to establish a new identity and learn new skills. This will not only help them to connect to the outside world, but will also make a big difference in self-confidence. When you feel good about yourself, depression and anxiety are reduced. It helps to realize that there are good things waiting in the future.”

As boomers age, they are also faced with their own mortality, even if they refuse to acknowledge it. “Grief in any form, such as the loss of a person, a home, or even the ability to perform certain tasks, must be dealt with,” said Small. “When you’ve lost something in life, you can’t bury the emotion; otherwise, it becomes more complex or deep.”

Counseling can help many people, as can facing the issues that come with getting older instead of living in denial. “It’s just like having a GPS system; when you find that you’re going the wrong way, you have to reprogram yourself,” Small said. “When you’ve lost something in life, you can’t bury the emotion; otherwise, it becomes more complex or deep.”

To learn more about Jewish Family & Children’s Service of Pittsburgh, visit www.jfcsph.org or call 412-422-7200. To reach VNA, call 800-245-3042 or visit www.vna.com.

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