

Keeping Mum:

The unspoken
impact of
supporting
ageing parents

April 2016

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- Over half of Britons over 45 are concerned about their ageing parents and yet never talk about it;
- Fewer than one in five view themselves as carers despite more than half providing some practical, financial or personal support and care;
- Long-term health conditions, dementia, victims of scams and loneliness are the biggest causes of concern this group have about their elderly parents;
- A third have taken time off or time out from work because of their concerns;
- Three quarters of those with a parent in a care home are worried about them;
- Feelings of guilt, loss, fear and doubt means that most are 'just getting on with it' without seeking support;
- One quarter say they don't know where to start looking for advice.

Introduction

The headlines are endless about the public burden of our ageing population, the quality and cost of care provision, the impact on an increasingly over-stretched NHS and fundamental changes to social care. And yet there seems to be little discussion of how the headlines translate into everyday life for families across the UK as increasing numbers of our parents, relatives and friends live longer and require more support.

Despite years of friendship, we found ourselves only reluctantly talking about our own ageing parents with each other, their needs and how we and our families cope. These conversations revealed that whilst our parents' situations might be different, we shared many common concerns: were we making the right decisions? How did we know what the right decisions were? Where do we find up to date, good, trustworthy information? Who else is going through this and what advice do they have?

Age Space is the result of these conversations. We wanted to better understand the scale of the issue and how it is affecting other people like us – from our careers to our relationships and wellbeing. Working with BritainThinks, a leading, insight-led research consultancy, we conducted in-depth qualitative and quantitative research of Britons aged over 45 years-old with at least one living parent.

We were shocked, but not wholly surprised, to learn more about the day-to-day reality for millions of 45+ aged Britons worrying and trying to support their ageing parents whilst juggling work, families and busy lives.

The findings reveal an often isolated and silent generation supporting the UK's ageing population, one that describes itself as quietly 'getting on with it', often detaching themselves from the issue emotionally while the strain begins to show in other areas. This generation doesn't see themselves as carers, but as daughters, sons and relatives doing what families do, sometimes in extremely difficult circumstances and often in the absence of readily available practical information and advice.

Age Space is a one-stop online community and resource for this generation anxious about or caring for their elderly parents or relatives. It signposts the best information and resources and at its heart is a friendly online conversation space where anyone can ask a question or find the answer to something of concern.

We hope you find this report useful and thought-provoking. This research is a first step for Age Space, with more exciting plans for the future, so for more information and news, please visit www.agespace.org

Ruth Darrah and Annabel James

April 2016

Executive summary

- **Supporting ageing parents is an unspoken issue affecting over half of Britons over 45**

Despite 54% of respondents aged over 45 giving practical, financial, health or personal care to at least one of their parents, fewer than one in five (16%) viewed themselves as carers. Instead, this group talked about 'just getting on with it' and trying not to engage with the emotional aspects of care or support.

- **...Yet a huge proportion are worried about their ageing parents**

The vast majority of people we spoke to (81%) were worried about their parent, or parents', wellbeing. Nearly half described themselves as very worried. The biggest concerns included long-term health conditions (77%), dementia (54%), being the victim of scams (51%) and loneliness (45%). Focus groups spoke of their guilt that they couldn't do more for their parents and wondered how they would cope if they lost their mental capacity.

- **For many this care and concern is affecting our work...**

One in five people we questioned said their concerns have a negative impact on their working lives. A third have taken time off work because of worries about their parents' wellbeing, while 40% have made calls or sent emails relating to their parents during work hours.

- **...It's taking its toll on our wellbeing...**

Over half (53%) of people said that worrying about their parents is having a negative impact on their wellbeing, and this rises to 76% among those who have a parent in a care

home. Many also reported a negative impact on their free time, ability to plan for the future and even go on holiday. Added to this, a third of respondents have had trouble sleeping in the last year due to worrying about a parent.

- **...And our relationships...**

A quarter of people reported that their relationships with family members have been negatively affected by concerns about their parents, while one in five said their relationship with their partner has suffered. Over a third have cancelled family or social arrangements because of concerns about their parent and 13% said they see less of their friends. Worrying about and supporting their parents is even impacting people's relationship with their own children, for more than one in 10 (12%) of those questioned.

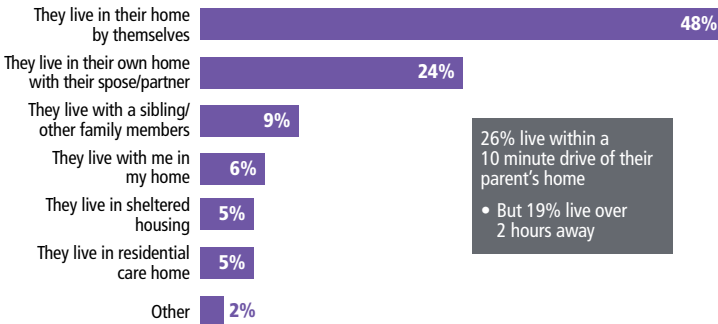
- **Despite this, many are suffering in silence and don't know where to turn**

While the impact of supporting and worrying about ageing parents is affecting Britons aged over 45 in almost every area of their lives, almost half have not sought support. Although 23% have taken to the Internet to uncover information and support, a similar number (26%) said that they didn't know where to start looking for advice and a further 23% have found it difficult to get what they need. Others described feeling guilty and disloyal talking about their parents to other people and didn't want to be seen as complaining, indicating that the issue is still considered private and difficult to broach.

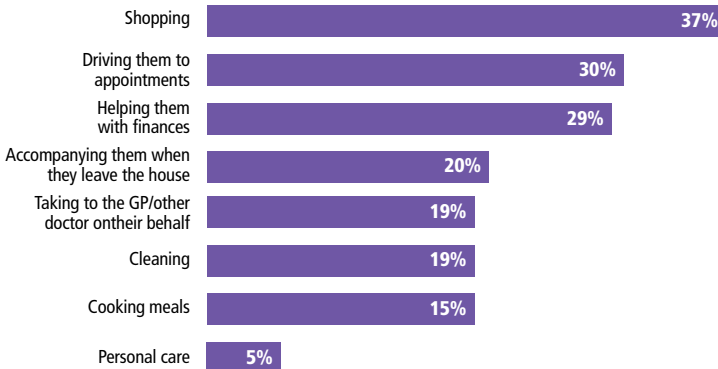
1. Lifting a lid on the UK's caring generation

While Britons with ageing parents have a diverse range of situations, the responsibilities and concerns for our parents are largely shared.

Different living situations



The caring generation's tasks



Findings at a glance

- 35% speak to their parent on the phone for over an hour each week
- 48% spend at least four hours with their parent or parents every week
- 23% of people with at least one ageing parent speak to them on the phone once a day or more

Quotes from our focus groups

"Society has put this label on it but it's just part of the whole cycle. We've lost touch with the idea that families do stuff for each other."
London, 54 – 64

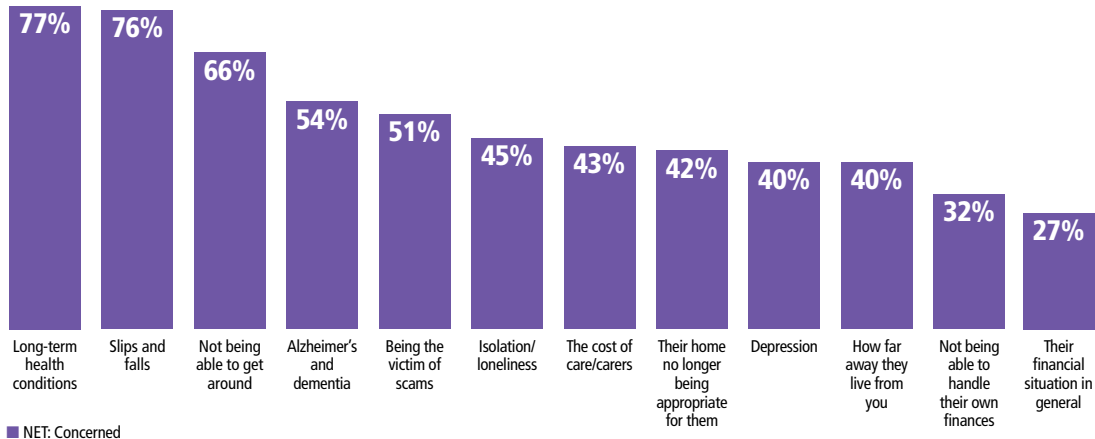
"I feel as though I'm looking after a child. I have to give so much time to her and sometimes she does silly little things."
Bristol, 55 – 64

Despite the extent of the tasks most people carry out for their ageing parents, only 16% would consider themselves carers, associating this term with paid-for help. Instead they think of themselves as fulfilling a "natural" role, that mirrors the love and care their parents gave them as children. However, this is not without its own difficulties, as our group described.

2. The wellbeing of ageing parents is a major concern for the vast majority

81% of people we spoke to were worried about their parent's wellbeing and 41% cited they were very worried. When we delved into this further, we found concerns spread across a huge number of issues – from health-related to financial and housing matters, with many worried about their parent becoming lonely, isolated or depressed.

Concerns cover the full range of parents' wellbeing



Quotes from our focus groups

"I am anxious if I leave the house and she falls, not being able to help herself to get up."
London, 55-64

"If something practical comes up hopefully you can just put that right and deal with it but how do you cope with them losing their memory?"
Birmingham, 45-54

3. Personal lives interrupted

Over half of those questioned said that worrying about their parents is having a negative impact on their wellbeing, and this rose to 76% among those who have a parent in a care home.

Over a third reported a negative impact on both their free time and ability to plan for the future, with focus group members talking about an overriding sense of guilt about getting on with their lives while their parents relied on them more. Some described that they were 'constantly on a short fuse' and unable to relax.

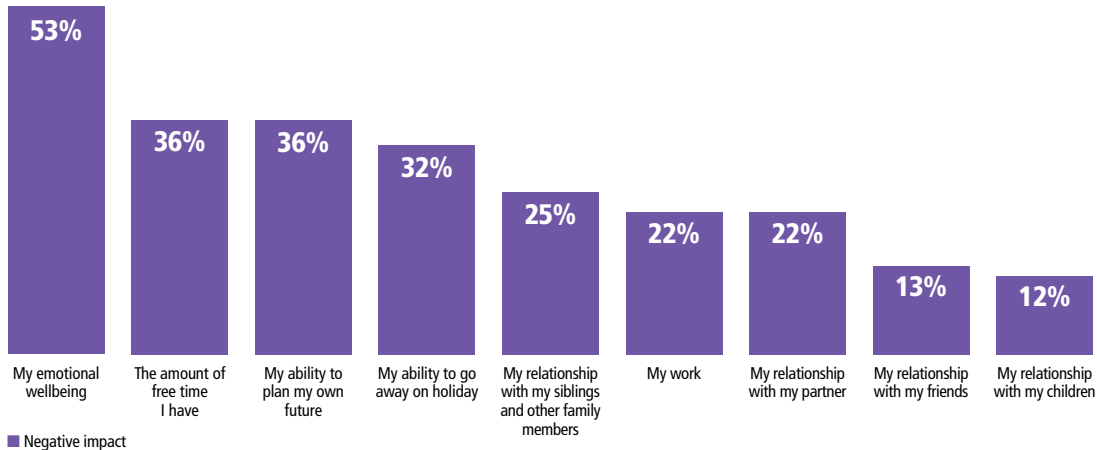
Findings at a glance

- 31% have had trouble sleeping in the past year because of worries about their parent's wellbeing
- 22% have put off booking a holiday

Quotes from our focus groups

"I get anxious when I leave my mum at home that she will open the front door and someone will attack her."
London, 55-64

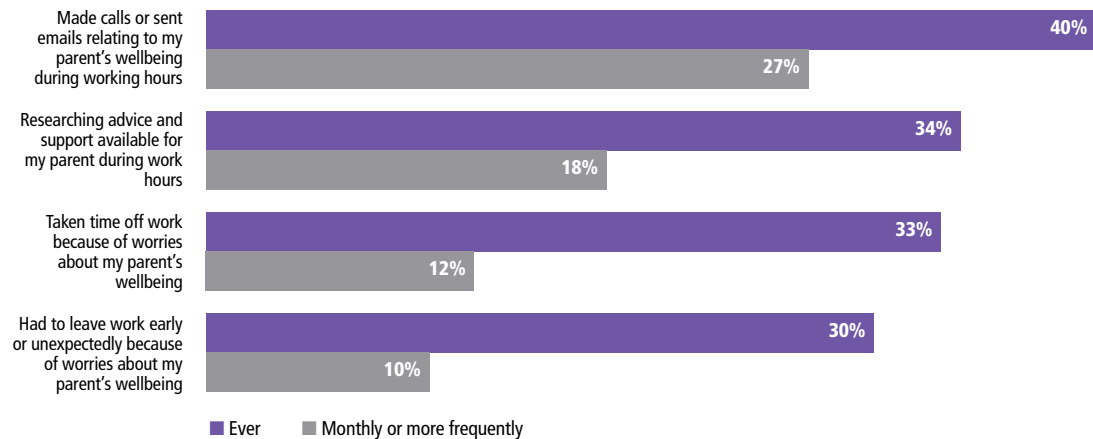
Worrying about ageing parents is affecting almost every aspect of our lives



4. Impact on work

Among those people we questioned aged over 45 and still working, 22% said concerns about their parents were having a negative impact on their work life, with many having to take time off work, make calls or do research on behalf of their parents during working hours.

Parent concerns creeping into the workplace



Quotes from our focus groups

"My life has changed dramatically; I'm on a constant short fuse. I want to go on holiday but I don't want to go on holiday because all the time I worry about Dad."
Bristol, 55-64

"I've got this big guilt thing. 'Am I doing enough? Am I seeing him enough? Am I seeing him enough? Is he alright?' The phone goes - I'm on this high alert the whole time, 'Is it the hospital?'"
Bristol, 55-64

5. Impact on relationships

It is little surprise that these many concerns and manifestations are taking their toll on people's personal relationships. A quarter (24%) of those we spoke to have argued with their parent as they struggle to express their worries for their wellbeing, while for one in five (20%), this anger has been directed at siblings or other family members. These frustrations are also being brought home, with 17% arguing with their partner in the past year about their parents, and a similar number (16%) spending less time with their children as a result of caring or supporting their ageing parents.

Focus group members told us how often their children 'had to take a backseat' to their parent's more pressing issues, while others spoke of feeling 'split' between their partners and their parents.

6. 'Getting on with it' without fuss

In spite of the toll this caring and concern for ageing parents is having on this sizeable number of Britons, fewer than half (46%) are actively seeking support. From our online research and focus groups, this stems from a feeling of not knowing where to go, as well as a sense of disloyalty and embarrassment about airing family issues publicly. Instead, the majority of people are shutting down emotionally and 'just dealing with it'.

Findings at a glance

- 36% have cancelled family or social arrangements because of worries about their parents.
- 10% have to do this at least once a month.

Findings at a glance

- 26% said they didn't know where to start when looking for advice or support
- Just 13% have discussed the issue with a friend
- 23% have sought advice or support about their parents online through search engines in the past year

Quotes from our focus groups

"My mum is quite negative which then brings me down so I'll go home and vent at home. I feel guilty then because I'm venting about my mum but secondly I feel guilty because my son and husband have to live with that. So it affects my mood at times."
Birmingham, 45-54

"[It creates]... pressure on work. Sometimes my mother isn't well and I have to ask for time to go to the home and see her."
London, 55-64

Conclusions

After undertaking this research and listening to people in our focus groups talk so openly about the dilemmas they face every day with their ageing parents, the full extent of this unspoken issue has become more apparent.

The responsibility of supporting and caring for our parents is going to become greater as the ageing population increases. A quarter of the population will be aged over 65 by 2033 and the number of people over 85 will treble within a generation. Today, 2.4 million women currently care for children and parents and one in four women in their 50s have a caring responsibility for an ageing parent or relative. Whilst not exclusively a female issue, inevitably women tend to take primary responsibility for care of elderly relatives.

This is an issue which is not going away and is likely to affect us all at some point in our lives. We hope that Age Space and particularly our forum encourages more conversation on this unspoken issue and gives exposure to the concerns people across the UK are facing.

Methodology

We worked with research consultancy BritainThinks between January and February 2016 to conduct both qualitative and quantitative research.

The qualitative research consisted of four two-hour focus groups with women aged between 45 and 64, worried about an ageing parent conducted in Birmingham, Bristol, London and Surrey.

The quantitative research formed an online questionnaire of 1,029 respondents aged over 45 years-old, with at least one living parent. The data has been weighted to reflect national demographics.

About Age Space

Age Space was launched in 2015 by Annabel James and Ruth Darrah. The site offers practical advice and support, as well as signposting to the best resources for all aspects of caring for an elderly parent. This includes all aspects of care, health, legal and financial concerns, including funding care, as well as dealing with everyday life. At its heart Age Space is a friendly and frank forum, a safe place to ask questions, say the 'unspeakable' and learn about creative solutions others have found.

Website: www.agespace.org

Twitter: [@AgeSpacer](https://twitter.com/AgeSpacer)

Facebook: www.facebook.com/agespace.org

