

MIND & BODY



HEAVY STRESS

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FINANCE MANAGER TAY LIAN CHUAN, the main caregiver for her 80-year-old father, who was diagnosed with prostate cancer in March. She also cared for her mother, who developed heart problems in 2011 and died in May.

Mr Tay Tian Sang singing while his daughter Lian Chuan claps along. Singing, she takes on the bulk of caregiving duties for her father.
ST PHOTO: CHENG JUN LIANG

Caregivers, fret not, more help is on the way

They can turn to respite schemes, courses and support groups



Joyce Teo

Finance manager Tay Lian Chuan, 53, provided care for her mother when the older woman developed heart problems in 2011, but her caregiving duties increased significantly from the start of this year when her mother's condition worsened.

About once a week, her 75-year-old mother would wake up in the middle of the night and complain of bodily discomfort, but even when pressed she would refuse to seek help at the hospital.

"I would stay with her, give her warm water, rub oil on her to make her feel better. Sometimes, she would vomit and I would stay up the whole night," says Ms Tay. "But I would still need to work the next day. There were times when I felt very helpless about the situation."

Although her four siblings helped out, they are all married and living with their families. Single, and living with her parents, Ms Tay took on the bulk of the caregiving duties.

In March this year, her 80-year-old father was diagnosed with prostate cancer and needed frequent radiotherapy sessions. And soon after, in May, her mother died.

"It was a very trying period for me and my dad," she says. "I felt like a zombie sometimes... but I just pressed on."

Stress is the No. 1 concern of those who seek out caregiving courses at Silver Caregivers Co-operative Limited (SCCL), said its treasurer and former chairman Audrey Lee.

There are now programmes where care receivers can be left with trained staff so caregivers can have a break.

RESPIRE PROGRAMMES

In March this year, the Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore (Minds) started a new support group for people caring for their intellectually disabled adult siblings. It is currently rolling out a programme where trained volunteers

step in on behalf of caregivers of the intellectually disabled for several hours each week, giving the carers much-needed respite.

In January next year, Minds will open its first before-and-after-school called the Special Students Care Centre at Woodlands Gardens School. So far, 25 out of the 100 places for these aged seven to 18 have been filled, said a Minds spokesman.

In July, voluntary welfare group Awwa opened its second dementia day care centre in Yishun. It has a daily capacity of 60 patients and currently has 16 clients. Awwa's first dementia day care centre, in Ang Mo Kio, is operating at full capacity with 45 patients a day.

The Government has said another 1,200 day care places for all care receivers will be added by 2020, to the 5,000 day care places last year.

Options for caregivers of the elderly include respite care services at eldercare centres and nursing homes as well as day care services.

Last month, the Government said it will continue to expand the integrated home and daycare scheme, which started about two years ago, and is now being offered by 15 senior care centres. Under this scheme, a senior can opt for a combination of care, such as going to a centre three days a week and getting home care on other days.

CAREGIVERS COURSES

There are also training programmes for caregivers with courses offered at various organisations, of which many are approved for the Caregivers Training Grant (CTG) administered by the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC). The agency coordinates Singapore's long-term care services.

Caregivers can tap the annual \$200 grant to attend approved training courses.

Last year, about 8,000 caregivers did so, up 18 per cent from 2013, says Mr Kelvin Lim, AIC's chief of senior support and care services development division.

He adds that more than 200 courses are offered each year, and the topics covered range from day-to-day care and clinical skills, such as tube feeding, to communication skills and self care.

While the cost of the CTG-approved courses ranges from \$50 to more than \$200, at least 80 per cent of them cost \$200 or less and

WHERE TO FIND SUPPORT

Connecting with fellow caregivers can help you in your caregiving journey. Besides the hospitals, there are also support groups in the community that you can join. Here are some of them.

FOR ALL CAREGIVERS

Silver Caregivers Co-operative's monthly tea sessions
Call 6536-3648

Caring Wellfare Association's monthly support group sessions
Call 6466-7957 or e-mail contact@cw.org.sg

FOR CAREGIVERS OF PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

Caregivers Alliance's support groups
Register at cal.org.sg/support/

Club Heal's caregivers' support groups
E-mail info@clubheal.org.sg

FOR CAREGIVERS OF PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA

Alzheimer's Disease Association's support group sessions
Register at alz.org.sg/cg/ or call 6377-0700

FOR CAREGIVERS OF INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED PEOPLE

The Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore support groups
Call 6547-8503

caregivers need only pay the \$10 co-payment for these courses. Such courses are very useful and some caregivers willingly pay for the course without taking up the grant, says Ms Lee.

At SCCL, about half of the course attendees do not use the grant. "Some find it challenging to use the grant because the care recipi-

ent has to sign on it," she says. "Their thinking is, 'How am I going to tell my father (or mother) that he's causing me stress?'"

Some caregivers do not attend courses simply because they have no time. SCCL is looking into getting trainers to go to caregivers' homes to conduct teaching sessions, says Ms Lee.

SUPPORT GROUPS

Another avenue for caregivers to manage their stress is to be part of a support group.

"As a caregiver, you tend to unintentionally cut off your social support... and you start to find that you're very closed up," says Ms Lee.

Some may feel that their care recipient is giving them more trouble compared to other care recipients.

"Sometimes, hearing about how others solve their issues can help you solve yours," says Ms Lee.

While Ms Tay is not part of a caregiver support group, she is keenly aware of the need to keep her spirits up in order to handle her caregiving duties. This is especially as she has had to make sacrifices to accommodate her caregiving duties.

"This year, I have had to cancel these trips. I feel sorry for myself," she says.

She stays positive by connecting with friends at church, in particular, a fellow caregiver. She also tries to eat well and exercise.

It helps to share with people who can understand your caregiving journey and stresses, says Ms Lee, who is also a caregiver. Some years back, she was so stressed when faced with her mother's condition that she felt the urge to close down a business she was running and leave the country again.

"I was travelling 90 per cent of the time for 20 years as the head of audit for a multinational corporation. That was less stressful," she says.

She and her family took some time to accept her mother's dementia, which was diagnosed in 2010.

"She would suddenly say she doesn't know what to wear, or how to dress up, among other things. As a caregiver, you grieve over what's happening to the loved one who used to be dynamic," says Ms Lee.

Many caregivers feel lost as they are going through many emotional challenges, she adds.

"We tell them, the first thing is to care for yourself. If you don't care for yourself, how do you care for someone else?"

She advises those who are not yet caregivers to prepare for it.

"Anyone who is ageing will need a caregiver sooner or later... We believe that the more you prepare yourself, the easier it is for you to do caregiving," says Ms Lee.

"We want people to celebrate the caregiving journey... Just enjoy whatever time you have left so that you don't have any regrets."

How to identify and manage caregiver stress

The stress caregivers suffer can lead to feelings of hopelessness and cause them to neglect their own needs.

This stress increases with circumstances, says Dr Tay Kai Hong, an associate consultant at the department of psychiatry at Sengkang General Hospital.

"However, when symptoms of caregiver stress become severe and protracted for more than a few weeks, the carer may have progressed to clinical depression," he adds.

They lose the ability to experience joy, which may be replaced by constant feelings of dread, drolegery, hopelessness and helplessness.

At this stage, it affects their usual eating, sleeping and working routine, as well as leisure activities and caregiving duties.

In more severe cases, suicidal thoughts may emerge, he says.

Common signs and symptoms of caregiver stress include:

- Feelings of resentment
- Physical and emotional exhaustion
- Changes in sleep patterns and appetite
- Changes in mood - feeling low or irritable
- Reduced interest and motivation in daily tasks or obligations or leisure activities
- Neglecting yourself if physically, nutritionally and emotionally
- Withdrawing from social contact
- Feeling that there is nothing to live for

Seek help if you suspect that you are clinically depressed or harbour suicidal thoughts, says Dr Tay.

"General mental health services, which are available in every major restructured hospital, can provide treatment and long-term support for struggling caregivers."

To manage caregiver stress, here are some things you can do, says Dr Tay.

- Take care of yourself first. Caring for yourself physically, nutritionally and emotionally allows you to provide sustainable care. Realise that you have your own needs and make a conscious effort to meet them.
- Focus on the positive emotions and experiences, and not just on the challenges. Some carers see their caregiving journey as the most fulfilling and rewarding endeavour in their lives.
- Appreciate the strengths and unique attributes of your intellectually disabled care recipient, and not just the impairment.
- Take a break - get support from your extended family. Know what respite services are available.
- Join a support group, find comfort and support from other "special parents" or caregivers, share tips and resources.
- Do some future care planning - yourself, or with the aid of professionals such as social workers and lawyers. Making care plans well in advance will reduce uncertainty and anxiety and provide peace of mind.