

Straits Times

April 27, 2005

Carers need care too

Caring for a loved one is a highly stressful job, but there is help at hand

By Mak Mun San

LIFE is looking up for Madam Mok Woon Leng, 79. She has been caring for husband Yeo Siew How, 85, since he suffered a stroke in 2000.



There is a psychological toll when one cares for a loved one, but Madam Mok plays music to keep herself and her wheelchair-bound husband Yeo Siew How happy.
PHOTO: WONG KWAI CHOW

Last October, she fell and needed a knee operation, which left her struggling to look after her wheelchair-bound spouse.

Her six children stepped in and insisted that they hire a maid, a move she had resisted until recently.

'I didn't come from a rich family, so I'm used to the hard life and taking care of other people,' she says in Cantonese.

A month ago, their Indonesian maid arrived. Madam Mok could finally take it easier and devote more time to reading the Bible and playing the organ.

But when Life! visited the elderly couple at their Yishun studio apartment, she was in a somewhat sombre mood.

In fact, she kept wiping away tears while at the same time wearing a brave smile.

Perhaps the tears undammed years of pent-up frustration, stress and anxiety - emotional issues which she herself may have been unaware of.

The fact is, caring for a loved one is a demanding task that affects a caregiver emotionally and psychologically. This is evident from a survey conducted by Touch Caregivers Centre last year on more than 80 caregivers here.

This is especially so if the caregiver is also frail, elderly and needs caring himself.

Set up in 2002, the centre is Singapore's first national resource centre that helps caregivers cope with the challenges. It provides information and referrals to the various resources available.

It also has a helpline that provides assistance to callers and channels enquiries to the appropriate agencies.

According to the survey, 42 per cent of respondents found caregiving 'highly stressful'. They rated emotional aspects, financial obligations and lifestyle change as the biggest causes of strain.

Dr Chia Tee Hien from St Luke's Hospital cautions that caregivers who have been caring for loved ones for a long period of time are more prone to burnout.

'You will have decreased motivation and the quality of care rendered will be affected. There will also be a drop in your sense of satisfaction,' he says.

Most caregivers here are female, aged 30 and above, with secondary education, married, unemployed and looking after a parent.

In 2000, there were about 210,800 caregivers in Singapore, experts say.

This figure is expected to increase significantly by 2030 as almost one in five people will be over 60 years old then.

The challenge at hand could be compounded if there are many caregivers like Madam Mok, who devote themselves to their loved ones wholeheartedly without seeking help or support.

Touch Caregivers Centre programme manager Cristal Chong says: 'Sometimes, it takes a crisis for caregivers to reach out for respite-care services, like when a caregiver breaks a leg or falls ill.'

Currently, more than 20 types of elderly services offered by about 270 service providers are available here. They include meals, home nursing and respite services.

Certain fees can be subsidised or waived on a case-by-case basis.

Support groups are another valuable source of emotional support, says Mrs Theresa Lee, executive director of the Alzheimer's Disease Association.

It has 115 carers on its support group list, with an average of 20 people attending each session.

'They provide an opportunity for carers to meet other carers, and share their thoughts, ideas, feelings, problems and experiences in a 'safe' environment,' she says.

'More importantly, they let carers know they are not alone.'

For more information on caregiving, call 1800-352-1622 or visit www.caregivers.org.sg

Send your comments to stlife@sph.com.sg

Self-care tips for caregivers

- INCLUDE family, friends and professionals in your team as you care for your loved one.
- Seek support from community agencies, including services such as day care, home help, home nursing and befriending.
- Give yourself credit for all you are doing.
- Say 'no' when it is necessary.
- Recognise that you will not always be perfect in providing care for your loved one.
- Be realistic about how much you can do in a day.
- Open up. Talk about your feelings and experiences with someone you trust.
- Ask for help when you need it and accept it when it is offered.
- Take time off for yourself. You have the right to schedule time away from caregiving responsibilities without feeling guilty.

Source: Healthy Mind, Healthy Body published by Touch Caregivers Centre

His 30-minute rule

MR ROBERT YEO, 84, cannot remember when was the last time he took a bus, let alone a car ride.

The sprightly man, who has been caring for his 82-year-old wife Yeo Mui Neo since she lost her eyesight to glaucoma 10 years ago, lives by a '30-minute rule'.

He will only go to places - usually coffeeshops where all their meals come from - which are within a 30-minute walking distance from their one-room Toa Payoh flat.



PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

'I can't leave her alone,' he says.

Talking to the childless couple, it is impossible not to be moved by their love and the quietly dignified way they live.

He is her eyes, hands and legs. 'He does everything for me. He's a very good husband,' says Mrs Yeo, who is bedridden because of weak legs.

When she has to use the toilet, he has to lift and carry her from the bed to the wheelchair and back again.

Their relative, Mrs Molly Seow, 71, calls him a 'superman'. 'He's a one-man show. He never complains. The minute she calls 'Bert', he'll be there next to her.'

Mr Yeo has declined suggestions to place his wife in a nursing home, opting instead for regular visits by health professionals from Touch Home Care.

Asked if he ever feels burnt out or worries about the future, he says: 'My greatest joy is taking care of her. I don't worry about tomorrow. We'll just take everything in our stride.'

Her blind duty

ABOUT five years ago, she lost her eyesight because of failing corneas. Then, she was diagnosed with colon cancer.



PHOTO: TERENCE TAN

Instead of being cared for, Madam Choy Chew Gip, 76, looks after her 80-year-old husband How Fook Cheong, who was diagnosed with dementia three years ago.

'When we go out, people think he is leading me. Actually, he loses his way all the time and I've to give him the correct directions,' Madam Choy says in Cantonese.

She has lived in Toa Payoh for more than 30 years and is no stranger to adversity.

Mr How abandoned her for 24 years and kept a mistress after he returned in 1980. Their grandson committed suicide in 2000 and their gambler son also walked out on them.

Relating her past to Life! in her two-room flat in a stoic way, it is apparent that she is looking after Mr How not because it is her duty as a wife, but because she cares about him. After all, they have only each other now.

Although she is blind, she makes sure he takes his pills by giving them to him personally three times a day. While their meals are delivered by Touch Home Care, she insists on brewing soup for him occasionally.

Smiling wistfully, she says: 'My life is very simple. I'm unhappy when he refuses to take his medicine.

'I'm happiest when he doesn't rant at me.'