

AN ELDERCARE SPECIAL

Caregiving made easier

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WHEN the maid looking after Mdm Low left unexpectedly, her family found that they could not cope.

The 72-year-old had become bed-ridden and incontinent after a stroke and was dependent on the maid for everything.

Recognising that caring for her was a full-time job, Touch Caregivers Centre (TCC) suggested that her family admit her to St Luke's Hospital for respite care.

There, Mdm Low underwent in-patient rehabilitation. When her new maid arrived, caregiver training was also provided so that Mdm Low would continue to be well looked after at home.

Mdm Low's case could have caused a fair bit of unnecessary stress for her family had TCC not stepped in to suggest respite care. Said Cristal Chong, a social worker at the centre: "Often, caregivers may not know what kind of help is available or how to apply for it."

"We can offer such relevant information and serve as a resource centre that can refer caregivers to the relevant organisations or services," she explained.

TCC also provides counselling and support for caregivers who are highly stressed and have relationship issues with their families.

Recently, the centre came across a caregiver who quit his job to look after

his 87-year-old mother.

She had suffered a stroke and now has dementia, diabetes, hypertension and incontinence. While one son devoted himself to taking care of her, the other children contributed financially. But the arrangement soon ran into problems.

"He felt that it was unfair. When he needed to have an eye operation himself, his siblings refused to take care of their mother while he was away," Ms Chong revealed.

so that the man did not have to take her to the polyclinic.

A nurse also visits their home regularly to change his mother's catheters because she is incontinent.

Help for the caregiver comes in other forms too. The centre can assess how to make homes more elder- or disabled-friendly.

For example, simple home modifications can help make day-to-day tasks safer, easier and physically less demanding.

In many cases, putting in a ramp would enable the caregiver to wheel the elderly person in and out of the bathroom in a wheelchair instead of having to carry the person.

Another service that caregivers can turn to is respite care. Various community hospitals and some nursing homes provide respite or convalescent care to patients so that caregivers can take a break.

Said Ms Chong: "Caregiving is a challenging task. Quite a lot of caregivers are unaware that there is respite care."

"If you need a holiday or just time out, you can apply to a community hospital or certain nursing homes for two to three weeks of respite."

"A lot of caregivers struggle with this because of guilt, especially when it comes to taking holidays. Some of them have not been on a holiday for years."

"However, many of them feel rested after a break and are assured to find the elderly person's needs are taken care of during the time of respite."

Caregivers who need more details can contact Touch at 1800 352 1622.

WHERE CAN I GET HELP?**Support Groups**

For caregivers of frail elderly persons:

- Sunlove Home for Intellectually Infirm (Tel: 6483 0841).

For caregivers of dementia patients:

- Alexandra Hospital's Dementia Carer Support Group meets for educational sessions by medical professionals (Tel: 6379 3427 for rehab service; 6379 3420 for clinic).

For caregivers of Alzheimer's Disease patients:

- The Alzheimer's Disease Association manages three New Horizon Dementia Day Care Centre which hold monthly support group meetings for caregivers (Tel: 6353 8734).

Community Case Management Service

Caseworkers can coordinate different community services for the frail elderly with multiple needs so that they can be cared for in their own home. These services include befrienders, home help service and day care centres. They are:

- SWAMI, or Sunshine Welfare

Action

- Mission (Tel: 6257 6117).

- Moral Case Management (Tel: 6489 8707).

- Tsao Foundation-Hua Mei Care Management Service (Tel: 6471 6059).

Counselling Service

For caregivers who need face-to-face or phone counselling:

- Sage Counselling Centre (Tel: 1800 353 8633).

Respite Care

For caregivers who need a short break (a few hours to a few weeks):

- Contact either the nursing homes or community hospitals (Log on

Another public education effort by:



ABCs to caring for elderly

TAKING care of an elderly person can be quite a challenge. But the good news is that you are not alone.

"Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. It's a sign of strength," said Ms Susan Mende, chief operating officer of the Tsao Foundation.

"You are recognising a situation in which you need assistance. And when you get assistance, you can continue to be a caregiver. If you get burned out, you cannot be a good caregiver. You may even get sick yourself," she said.

She recommended calling a family meeting to thrash out everyone's role and level of involvement in caring for the elderly person.

"It is important to plan who does what - finances, caregiving and so on. And this should be done with the elderly person. Ask them what they

want. If we do not consult them and they are unhappy with the outcome, we think that they are ungrateful. We have to ask them," she said.

It is also important that the planning takes place early, not when things are already at the crisis stage and everyone is emotional and exhausted.

Ms Mende also warned against making the mistake of committing to more than you can deliver, which can lead to guilt and disappointment.

Bear in mind that you can call on your neighbourhood Family Service Centre for assistance. Apart from counselling, you can also get help with things like finding someone to take care of meal delivery and locating a suitable day care centre.

There is also the Community Case Management Service for frail elderly with multiple medical and social

needs. Care plans are developed on a case-by-case basis and arrangements are tailored to the particular needs and problems of the family.

Caregivers can also attend caregiver training courses at the Hua Mei Training Centre of the Tsao Foundation.

Conducted on Saturday afternoons over three to four weeks, these courses cover the basics such as physical care, communication and stress management.

Ms Mende added that caregivers should also prepare themselves for their roles by first learning about the ageing process.

"Know what to expect. Make your home safe for the older person and plan for medical care as well. It is important to have their health monitored on an ongoing basis," she said.

Beat the blues

CAREGIVER support is necessary to avoid burnout, pointed out social worker Ms Cristal Chong from Touch Caregivers Centre.

"To continue caring for the elderly, the needs and interests of the caregiver must first be met."

"Ways must be found for life to be satisfying for the caregiver. If your needs are neglected, you can become resentful and frustrated," she added.

She recommends:

- Talking to someone to get things off your chest.
- Maintaining a balance between your roles.
- Seeking help from family, friends and even neighbours.
- Taking good care of yourself and not neglecting your own physical and social needs.
- Obtaining information on care giving and on the illness the elderly person is suffering from.
- Taking breaks from caregiving so that you do not feel trapped.
- Joining a support group to express your feelings and

share experiences.

Ms Chong added that experiencing some stress is normal and that not all caregivers are the same.

The level of stress caregivers experience depends on factors such as how the caregivers feel about providing care, their current and past relationships to those they care for and their coping abilities.

There are, however, some symptoms of stress that caregivers should look out for:

- Depression, crying
- Sleep problems
- Gastric pain
- Interpersonal problems
- Rashes
- Withdrawal
- Alcohol/drug use
- Headaches
- Feelings of frustration, anger, sadness or guilt.

If any of these symptoms persist, the caregiver should seek professional advice from a doctor or counsellor.

To find out more about support for caregivers, log on to www.caregivers.org.sg

TIPS FOR CAREGIVERS:

Talk to someone to get things off your chest.



Take good care of yourself and do not neglect your own physical and social needs.



Take breaks from caregiving so that you do not feel trapped.



Seek help from family, friends and neighbours.

