

Spotlight on living with dementia, caregivers at Enabling Festival

Shermaine Ang

Junior college student William Koh, 18, struggles to balance his studies with caring for his 60-year-old mother who has dementia.

This took a toll on his grades, and he moved into his school's hostel in June 2022 to focus on his A levels.

But he worries about his mother as she has other health issues such as diabetes, and has difficulty walking.

A retired insurance agent, she is divorced and lives with William and their maid.

"When I go back, I care for her emotionally. Having to make sure that she's happy and her needs are being met is really, really tiring for me. It's not something I'm used to, having to take care of someone at my age," he said.

William has two older brothers in their late 20s, but they are not living in the same home.

He was speaking to The Straits Times at the National Gallery on Friday, where an annual festival to raise awareness of what it means to live with dementia was launched.

Organised by Enable Asia, a social enterprise that advocates for persons with dementia and their family caregivers, the Enabling Festival is supported by The Majority Trust and the Agency for Integrated Care.

The annual festival, which is in its fifth year, features art therapy and movement workshops by art, dance and theatre practitioners.

It also has talks on topics such as night respite options and the Professional Deputies and Donees scheme, sharing sessions by caregivers, and a panel discussion on grieving by a doctor, a funeral director and a family therapist.

Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Health Rahayu Mahzam, who was the guest of honour at the event, stressed the importance of supporting caregivers.

She said that the new option of night respite service supports caregivers of seniors with dementia who experience behavioural and sleep issues at night.

The talks and activities at the festival allow open conversations about persons living with dementia and their caregivers' well-being, she said.

Mr Danny Tan, co-founder of Enable Asia, said the 2022 event focuses on physical touch, to bring persons with dementia and their caregivers closer together through art therapy and to offer tactile stimulation to those with dementia.

He started the social enterprise in 2017, a year after his mother, 89, was diagnosed with advanced dementia.

"We feel that art, dance and music can slow down the state of dementia," he said. "We want to trigger memories for people with dementia through touch, and to nudge their caregivers to hug and have conversations with them."

The festival will run till Oct 16.

shermaineang@sph.com.sg