

Exhibition offers glimpse into lives of people with dementia

Interactive event aimed at strengthening public support for patients and caregivers

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Mr William Koh was only 17 when he became a caregiver to his mother after she was diagnosed with young-onset dementia at just 59. He realised something was wrong when his mother, Margaret, looked at him and said: "Where is William?"

"I was like, 'Oh mum, that's so funny,'" he said.

He quickly realised that she meant it. That came as a shock, leaving him feeling lost, but he quickly adapted to his new role, even as challenges grew.

"During my free time, I love to go on walks with her and play board games, like Jenga and Snakes and Ladders," said Mr Koh.

The national serviceman, who will turn 20 in 2024, was addressing an audience on Jan 6 at the

launch of an interactive exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore aimed at strengthening public support for people living with dementia.

The Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) launched the exhibition as part of 2024's national #DementiaFriendlySG campaign.

The exhibition, Facing Dementia in Singapore, will run till March 31. President Tharman Shanmugaratnam was the guest of honour at the launch.

Every three seconds, someone in the world develops dementia.

In Singapore, the number of people living with dementia is on the rise. By 2030, more than 152,000 people in Singapore are projected to live with the condition.

"It is important for us to meet the needs of persons living with dementia and their caregivers, and enable them to continue to live and age well in the communities and at



President Tharman Shanmugaratnam speaking with Mr William Koh, 39, a national serviceman and caregiver to his mother who has dementia, at the launch of Facing Dementia in Singapore at the National Museum of Singapore on Jan 6. The exhibition is part of 2024's national #DementiaFriendlySG campaign. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

home," said AIC chief executive Tan Kwang Cheak at the launch.

For Mr Koh, caregiving became more challenging as his mother's dementia progressed, and she was diagnosed with diabetes in February 2023.

"Once, when I was eating with her at home, she fell. That really scared me like crazy," he told The Sunday Times.

"She's also diabetic and has to inject herself. (Administering her insulin jab for the first time) - that was the scariest moment for me because I hate needles... So I closed my eyes and just inserted it."

Besides taking care of his mother's physical needs, he also keeps her engaged.

"I set up lunch dates, and I try to find friends for her," he said.

Together with four friends, he is working on a social project for young people looking after their loved ones with dementia. He invites others to share their caregiving woes on an Instagram account named Our Main Oasis.

The project falls under Youth Action Challenge, a programme under the National Youth Council that offers young people the chance to pursue their aspirations and shape the future they want.

Mrs Evon Estrop, who owns a company that provides relocation services for expatriates, was also at the launch with her husband, Mr Peter Estrop, 64, who has dementia,

and their two granddaughters.

The Singaporean couple shared their stories in a video playing at the exhibition. New challenges surface each day, but they fight on.

"I still have other things to do. It's not just being at home every day. With my brothers, we go cycling," Mr Estrop told ST.

His granddaughters, Maesi Evera Leow, 11, and Maia Erika Leow, 13, said they try to do activities with him to keep him occupied when they visit him.

"There's no cure, but you can be positive about it. You can turn it around and say: 'Hey, now we're going on a journey of making memories,'" said Mrs Estrop, 62.

"When Peter cannot remember,

these memories that were made through the journey will help him... The brain may forget, but the heart will always remember."

At the launch of Facing Dementia, AIC also unveiled new resources, including a conversation guide for young people to help them converse with their grandparents, and signed a memorandum of understanding with transport operator SMRT to strengthen collaborations in dementia-friendly initiatives.

For instance, SMRT will be including mental health awareness in its staff training, to better support commuters with such needs, said AIC's Mr Tan.

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