

No one to share the load when mum and dad get sick

Unlike in larger families where caregiving load can be spread out, an only child faces immense stress and is more likely to suffer burnout.

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Correspondent

On a Tuesday afternoon at a coffee shop in Ang Mo Kio, Mr Glenn Poh returns to his waiting mother with two drinks, one hot and one iced. She picks the iced lemon tea.

"All my life she never used to drink cold drinks but now she always wants something cold. It's like she's a small kid again," he says of his 76-year-old mother, Madam Tan See Ming, who has Alzheimer's disease.

As the only son, Mr Poh took it upon himself to look after her, personally navigating the difficult and tiring of caring for an ailing parent.

"Whatever needs to be done needs to be done. It's because I was raised like that. He says. Having seen how his mother cared for his late father after stroke, he knows he wanted to do the same for her.

In Singapore, with its rapidly ageing population and cultural norms of filial piety, many adult children find themselves thrust into the role of caregiver.

Life can be put on hold when mum or dad falls ill, and those without family or other help often find themselves shouldering the whole load.

Data shows there was at least 1.6 million only children with mothers above the age of 50 in 2023, more than triple the 388,000 in 2013.

In a population of 5.9 million, that's almost 1.6 million people above the age of 50. While the number of only children is just a fraction of that total, researchers and social workers warn that unlike in larger families where the caregiving load can be spread out, only children face immense stress, among other health challenges, they are more likely to experience burnout.

A stout man with a beard and glasses, usually seen in polo shirts and slacks, Mr Poh, 44, is unassumingly polite. He says "thank you" or "please" (Hokkien for "sorry to bother") to anyone he interacts with, and thanks The Straits Times team profusely at the end of their interview.

He talks about his days in a methodical way, ticking off each activity as if going down a list. He says showing up late and "standard operating procedures" help him find structure amid the uncertainty and constantly evolving nature of his mother's condition.

He asks him about challenging moments, such as his up-pipe spitters. The weak bones, rather than take that shower at the usual time, his mother found it awkward with throwing away rubbish and lighting the oil lamp at the family altar.

I dived at her, and I asked her to go and take a bath, which she did. By the time she came out of the bathroom, I apologise but she didn't remember. I forget it when I lose my temper with her because she cannot remember," he says, tearing up.

"It isn't just a good feeling because you did something wrong, but you're not able to make up for it."

He admits that often happened in the initial stages, especially when he had unrealistic expectations about his mother's condition, and became frustrated that he could do more to help her.

Like Mr Poh, human resource executive Goh Lim found it hard to come to terms with her mother's condition. The elder woman had a massive heart attack weeks before her death in December 2023, leaving her unable to walk or use the bathroom without assistance.

Although the family had a domestic helper to help with her care, Mr Lim, 44, was worried the letter might become burnt out and quit.

"I get even more stressed, and kept pushing my mother to do more to regain strength and mobility. It was only when my mother said I should let her recover at her own pace that I realised I was imposing my own thoughts and timeline on her," she says.

Her mother who is in her 70s, is still undergoing occupational and

physical therapy, but is unlikely to fully regain her independence.

Ms Lim admits being "not in a good headspace" then, compounded by the fact that her mother, a nurse who lives with her husband, could no longer be as social or active.

"The hardest part was seeing my mother losing her independence. It's emotionally and psychologically. It's been very, very hard for me. There was a point where I felt like I was crying all the time," she says, adding that she stopped seeing friends for nearly six months. The situation also strained her marriage.

Although her employer, a multinational energy company, was accommodating and offered her flexible work arrangements, work took a back seat. It had become difficult to concentrate on her job when she was constantly worrying about what was happening at home.

It was only after a psychologist advised her to carve out a specific time every day to check in with her mum that she was able to better compartmentalise her time and emotions, she says.

"I've thought that if this didn't happen, I would've been so much better at my job. I would definitely have put in extra hours to adapt to my new team. But because of the way things panned out, you end up not get recognised because I do want to help out and take care of my mother," she adds.

Asian researchers about caring for one's parents are limited. For example, those who put their parents in nursing homes may be seen as "unkind" while those who gradually changing, many still see caregiving as an obligation rather than a choice, and lack of family support can leave caregivers feeling stressed and disappointed.

While this may be even more heightened for only children, there has not been much research into the issue, because of their small numbers, says Dr Jeremy Lim, who runs the centre for Ageing Research and Education (Care) at Duke-NUS Medical School.

In a 2023 survey of elder adults registered with the centre for ageing research, those who were only children reported higher levels of perceived stress and depressive symptoms than those with siblings. However, the sample size of non-only children — as compared with 70 respondents with siblings — was too small for any statistically significant conclusions, he adds.

The main question is how much support is needed for only children. "Practically, my branch is that having siblings does not matter as much as whether those siblings are geographically close or not. It could not be an 'only child' but one can still be an 'only caregiver' if siblings are unable or unwilling to pitch in," says Dr Lim.

He points out that in families where there is only one child, there is no "spare" of sharing the load, and the burden of care naturally lands on the only child.

"Caring is both labour-intensive and financially demanding, and the worry is that children who spend the prime of their life caring for ageing parents will not have sufficient savings and/or CPF for their own old age," he says.

"This problem could be compounded if they do not have siblings who can at least lend financial support even if they are unable to physically help with caregiving."

Children who are caregivers may also experience disruptions to their careers. Mr Michelle Tan, 44, a global product manager at a medical device company, had to cancel two work trips this year because her mother was hospitalised six times. Madam Mary Tang, 78, has high cholesterol, high blood pressure, osteoarthritis, diabetes and diverticulitis, or inflammation of the large intestine lining.

"It's not always an onerous/burdensome task when an emotional toll," says Ms Tan. "If you see that this isn't causing me stress, I would be fine."

Calling himself "independent and a bit rebellious", the 16-year-old says he would have taken the chance to work overseas if he had siblings to "keep an eye" on his mother, especially after her father died.



Mr Glenn Poh, 44, with his mother, Madam Tan See Ming, 76, who has Alzheimer's disease. As an only child, he took it upon himself to look after her, in the initial stages, when he had unrealistic expectations about his mother's condition, he became frustrated that he could not do more to help her. ST PHOTO: HEYTER TM

"I've held myself back by not recognising my own stress," he says.

Others, like tax consultant Leon Khalid Goh, 56, end up leaving work and lives abroad to return home.

In January 2021, his then 84-year-old father was admitted to the intensive care unit after a coronavirus diagnosis. His mother, unable to look after her way home, was later diagnosed with dementia.

Then based in Kuala Lumpur, Mr Goh knew he had to travel back after nearly three decades away, but flew right into Singapore's strict pandemic-control policies.

"Those 30 days in hotel quarantine was the longest two weeks of my life. Knowing my father was fighting for his life, my mother wasn't well too, but not being able to do anything," he says.

His job-setting life gave way to one that largely revolved around cooking, cleaning, and taking his parents to medical appointments.

Earlier this year, his father, Mr Khalid Goh, 84, had a violent outburst during a regular appointment at Changi General Hospital, yelling at nurses, doctors and even security. As they were leaving the clinic, his mother suffered a fall and had to be hospitalised.

During the three days she was in hospital, her husband kept her in bed. "That's when the medical staff

asked if my father had dementia," Mr Goh recalls.

"How could it be? He has been so independent and able to do everything himself. But in hindsight, I noticed the signs. You don't see what you don't want to see."

HELP FROM THE COMMUNITY

At the Touchette active ageing centre in Ang Mo Kio, Madam Tan is getting distressed. It is 12pm and she has been at "Happy Exercise" for nearly 45 minutes, but her son is nowhere to be seen. A popular weekly activity at the centre, the heart-healthy routine combines simple movements with basic cognitive exercises like counting backwards — a workout for mind and body.

The hour is also when Mr Poh goes to run errands like buying groceries, doing the laundry or cancelling up on cleaning.

At 12:15pm, he appears, and her face visibly relaxes.

He helps put away the chairs, thanking each staff member by name for watching his mother while he was gone.

Then it is off to AMK Hub, a 15-minute walk away in the neighbouring East.

Mr Poh used to take his mother out to a variety of places, but now she becomes anxious when faced with the unfamiliar, so they stick to their neighbourhood mall.

He holds her hand as they walk, his bulky backpack and a sling bag filled with what he calls "cognitive exercises" like medicine, a whiteboard and a change of clothes — a safeguard against his memory loss.

Several caregivers hang on the shoulder straps. For food or groceries, he says, he has hands-on help to hold Madam Tan or catch her if she trips.

"She's very 'sticky' with me. At the early stage of her disease, I tried to have other family members watch her while I went out, but she got very upset, and anxious, so it's better that I'm with her," he says.

Those days, an aunt helps out once a week, accompanying Madam Tan to Badklim classes at a nearby temple, and giving Mr Poh cash to run errands.

Social service agency Touch has also been a source of support.

It runs a wide range of programmes and centres, including an active ageing centre at Block 433, Ang Mo Kio Avenue 10, a store's store from Mr Poh's home.

Finding the right community support can be a lifeline for solo caregivers.

Mr Poh has registered his mother for activities every weekday, ranging from exercise to board games, to help her physically and mentally engaged. A social worker helps to coordinate their assistance or care

programmes, including counselling support for Mr Poh.

In 2022, the centre started Carex Circle, a caregiver support group, which Mr Poh repeatedly refers to as a light shining through the fog.

Through monthly activities, he was connected to other caregivers within the neighbourhood, including those with years of experience under their belt like Ms Gerald Neo, 61, whom he refers to as a "mentor".

The eldest teacher who cares for a 93-year-old mother with advanced dementia, says: "Single children like Glenn have to carry, especially since he's still very young and a man trying to care for his mother, so we try to help wherever we can, be it simple tips on how to handle situations, or what to expect when the disease progresses."

"It might be small things like incontinence, urinary tract infections, or your parents' inability to clean themselves, but it can be very traumatic."

For instance, when Mr Poh's mother started losing control of her bladder, Ms Neo used to be the first person he turned to about what to do.

Others, like 44-year-old Robin Tan, came to day care and home nursing services to help with his elderly parents.

Ms Lim has several chronic diseases, a fractured hip, and breast cancer. Her mother, Madam Ang Ah Nio, 85, has



Mr Glenn Poh, 44, tending to his mother, Madam Tan See Ming, 76, who has Alzheimer's disease. As an only child, he took it upon himself to look after her, in the initial stages, when he had unrealistic expectations about his mother's condition, he became frustrated that he could not do more to help her. ST PHOTO: HEYTER TM



Mr Glenn Poh, 44, with his daughter Phyllis, 46, and grandchildren Nick A, B, and Lauren (right). Ms Lim has several chronic diseases, a fractured hip, and breast cancer. Her mother, Madam Ang Ah Nio, 85, has several chronic diseases, a fractured hip and breast cancer. ST PHOTO: HEYTER TM

More caregiving stress for those with no siblings

As Singapore's population ages rapidly, many adult children find themselves unexpectedly thrust into the role of caregiver. This is particularly so for those who are an only child and bear the full burden of caregiving responsibilities. With family sizes shrinking this trend is expected to become even more pronounced in the coming years.



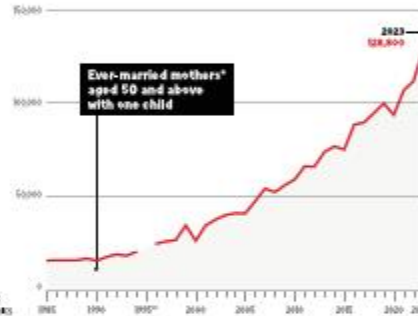
CAREGIVING LOAD

Assuming each family unit comprises two parents, this implies that in families with only one child, the caregiving load is twice as high compared with families with two children, and four times greater than in families with four or more children.



MORE AGEING MOTHERS WITH ONE CHILD

NOTE: "Unmarried females are those who have never married or had one or more marriages dissolved or divorced/separated. Data not available for 1995.



dementia and has to use a wheelchair to get around. Each morning, Mr Teo and his parents wait at the void deck of their three-room flat in Block for two different transport services. One takes his father to Dr Lido's ElderCare at Marina Parade, and the other, his mother to Tanjong Pagar Centre in Bras Basah.

With his parents looked after, he can go to work in his IT support role for ValueMax, a Singapore firm with interests in moviebooking, punting and jewellery stores. His parents are also dropped off at home in the evening and he brings them dinner.

On the weekend, a care aide comes to bathe his mother. But things don't always go according to plan. "Sometimes we're just a little bit late in the mornings because you know how old people are. Then the transport will have without us, which means I have to try to find a way to get my father to day care, or we will have to stay at home."

"Other times, the aide may not come on weekends, and I have to shower my mother myself."

It can be a bit difficult dealing with my mother because she can't remember or doesn't want to take her medicine, or shower, but I have to tell myself it's okay, she has done it for me before so I should help her," he says, checking up.



Mr Howe (third) left, 56, left his career and his home to move home to care for his mother. Helen Mahesh (second) and her husband, Hussein, 47, and father, Mr Shafiq (left), 54, are also caregivers.

how much I'd help, but after a few weeks, I learnt not to react to things my mother was saying or doing.

"Getting to see people from all walks of life coming together and sharing all kinds of challenges, it made me feel like I wasn't alone," he says.

Much like the support group at Teach, CAL's classes are aimed at equipping caregivers with practical and soft skills like creative problem-solving, and making time for self-care when looking after another person, says Mr Louis Lee, an executive CAL programme co-ordinator who runs the training sessions.

"Importantly, it's not us the facilitators who matter in this, it's about forming a network of fellow caregivers who can support each other in the long run."

"Whenever I see in these chat groups that people are organising meetings, or answering each other's requests for help, it makes me very happy because I know my job here is done," he says.

ANTICIPATING FUTURE NEEDS AND WISHES

In 2018, Singapore introduced rational advance care planning (ACP) programmes so individuals can set down their healthcare wishes before they lose their mental capacity to do so. With more Singaporeans encouraged to sign up, ACP is set for a big push in August 2024 in hopes of reducing the stress of decision-making in difficult moments, even though they are not legally binding.

According to the Agency for Integrated Care, some 34,650 Singaporeans had ACP by May 2023. In a speech in August 2024, Minister of State for Digital Development and Information and Health Holdings Mahesan said another 30,000 ACPs were completed between July 2023 and August this year.

Ms Tan, the medical device executive, was spotted late one evening at an ACP after an asymptomatic episode in 2020. She found that the future would be turned and that her mother might end up having to look after her instead.

"While it is stressful for my mother to have to deal with the situation, at least there's a plan," she says.

It also prompted conversations between her and Madam Ting about what the older woman wanted if things took a turn. A former career operator Madam Ting said she would leave things in the hands of her "more educated" daughter.

"She wants to be in a quiet environment and wants to be at home if possible," Ms Tan says.

"But of course if it's something serious, then we'll have to decide what is the best care possible for her in that situation."

Some parents are also making plans so that their only children are not left with the heavy job of looking after them.

Former BMW marketing executive Mary Lim has entered the fray through retirement in there is no financial burden on her only daughter Yvonne, 48, a general manager at a private lifestyle club.

The active 57-year-old still regularly meets old colleagues and friends, volunteers at church and attends the "occasional" Pilates class. In-between looking after her granddaughters Lauren, 12, and Nicola, 10, who live a block away.

"I'd get sick. I hope to have my mother take care of me, of course, but I won't mind going to a good nursing home either," she says, perched on a sofa in her daughter's flat as her body granddaughter clamors for her attention.

"She knows it, we've spoken about it, so I think by having the financial plan, it at least takes away some stress when I'm hospitalized," she says.

Sharing an oval fruit tea at the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf in AMK Hub, Madam Tan waddles the mid-afternoon crowd of students and shoppers craning through the mall as her son sits across the table fiddling with his laptop.

The bill allows him to catch up on work while his mother relaxes in the air-conditioning.

For a graduate with a computer science degree, working on IT support for a local company is not challenging, but it pays the bills. At night, Mr Poh stays up till the wee hours, working on a tracking app for those with dementia, or simply watching anime.

He knows the caregiving has exacted a price on his health, but he just has to keep going. And he knows that as his mother's condition worsens, she will need greater care. He plans to have her live at home until he can't longer care for her. He doesn't want to think about where she would go if something were to happen to him.

"I worry that if a day comes when I'm not around and can't take care of her any more, she will forget me, or think I abandoned her," Mr Poh says.

"It's my greatest nightmare."

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FINDING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Mr Poh remembers the exact moment he knew his life would change for good: 3.59pm on Oct 15, 2021. Down with a cold, he was unable to take his mother to her polyclinic appointment following a series of tests for dementia.

He was told about his mother's dementia diagnosis over the phone, while he was standing outside Ang Mo Kio Polyclinic.

The doctor continued to speak but I couldn't take in the details at all. Throughout the rest of the day I tried to act as normal as possible. That evening, I did a lot of Googling, then I knew it was a lot worse."

He has since come to terms with his mother's condition, he says. "I don't think that I've got over it. It's just that you just have to live with it."

"I know this is a war that I will lose eventually, but the small wins like making my mother more comfortable, dealing with a situation better, those small daily wins, I take them."

Studies have shown that the emotional burden of caring for an older person, especially a parent, is a heavy one. According to the research based on caring for the elderly published by Care at Polyclinics in 2023, nearly one-third of caregivers in the survey exhibited de-

pressive symptoms.

"Further attention is needed on family caregivers' own physical and mental health, given that the prevalence of depressive symptoms among them is much higher than the national average," the researchers note.

It is a problem that social service agencies are aware of, with many conducting sessions on emotional well-being during training programmes. Research has shown that those with strong support networks through family, friends or support groups exhibit less stress and have more positive experiences as a caregiver.

Yet asking for help in a group setting can be difficult for some like 57-year-old Erris Zhang.

After his father's sudden death in 2022, Mr Zhang, who lived with his grandmother, was now responsible for his mother, who lives in a neighbouring block.

It took the accounts specialist in the tech industry a year of struggling to manage his mother's schizophrenia before he walked into a Family Service Centre in his neighbourhood for help.

A social worker suggested he attend a bi-weekly programme at Caregivers Alliance Limited (CAL), a non-profit organisation supporting caregivers to those with mental health conditions.

"I was initially sceptical about