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“Turning anxiety into a positive force”

Information technology professional and volunteer counsellor Angie Chew Monksfield went through a mid-life crisis of sorts, which led her to start a non-profit centre to educate people on healthy and happy living.

Now in her late 40s - she declined to give her exact age - she describes a mid-life crisis as “a time when you feel you have come to a checkpoint in your life; when you look back, wonder if you’ve lived your life the way you wanted and begin to take stock of the time you have left”.

But she chose to view such anxiety in a positive light. “It has made me more passionate about being able to make a difference in the community, so that whatever mistakes I made and suffering I’ve been through can benefit other people,” says the practising Buddhist, who is also president of the non-sectarian Buddhist Fellowship.

Brahm Centre, which she set up at Ren Ci Hospital last month, offers counselling services and organises free talks and yoga and taiji classes. The centre has a full-time director and staff and is funded by donations from well-wishers and the Tan Chin Tuan Foundation.

By day, she is vice-president of the Singapore office of global Indian IT company NIIT Technologies. After office hours and on Saturdays, she oversees the centre and does the occasional spot of counselling there.

“I’m quite hands-on for now because it is so new. It’s important to ensure the energy level is there and its mission is being fulfilled,” says Ms Monksfield, whose unusual surname comes from her British husband.

From a decade of taking counselling courses and helping others, she has found that “many mid-lifers are stuck in jobs they hate but don’t have the confidence to move on”. The root cause, she thinks, is that “as a society, we’re conditioned to think that money is everything”.

Her philosophy is that “one should learn to live with less and be happy”.

Middle age, she says, has been a process of simplifying her life. She now goes for \$10 haircuts and dyes her hair herself out of a bottle - instead of frequenting expensive salons like before - and recently returned from a nine-day meditation retreat in the Australian outback. She has been practising meditation for 10 years.

“It helps to clear the mind, to discharge negativity and unhealthy emotions, so you can respond in a clear and positive manner in difficult situations,” she says.

She needed those reserves of strength as she cared for her late mother - who had dementia for many years and died last November - and adjusted to her changing relationship with her two teenage children.

For one thing, she deeply regrets not knowing until a few years before her mother's death that her mother's erratic and anti-social behaviour "was a medical condition that could have been treated and slowed down".

Her mother would sleep in the day and be up and about at night. She insisted on not taking showers and in the six months before she died last November, could no longer recognise family members and thought Ms Monksfield, her main caregiver, was her youngest sister, whom she was close to and is still alive.

Ms Monksfield also had to learn to accept that her children, who "consumed" her time and energy when they were younger, no longer needed her as much.

Her daughter, 16, and son, 14, are year-four and year-two students at the School Of The Arts. "My kids think anybody above 40 is really old," says Ms Monksfield with a laugh. "They lock you out of their Facebook account because they feel you are too prying."

In turn, she has learnt "how to suggest and not nag", to respect their views and "be supportive of their changing interests, like my son is now into rugby, and my daughter goes ice-skating".

—Clarissa Oon