

Still young, and already a caregiver

Children whose parents need care are thrust into the role while finding their footing in life

Janice Tai
Social Affairs Correspondent

When Miss Rachel Tan started university two years ago, she began contemplating suicide.

Her mother, 63, who has schizophrenia, decided to stop taking her medication after living with the condition for about a decade. This led to meltdowns where she cut up or threw things around and became verbally aggressive.

Every afternoon, Miss Tan, a social work undergraduate who is her mother's main caregiver as her father and sister both work, tries to do her homework in the living room while her mother rants.

"I try to be around most of the time to calm her down, but after a while, it got a bit too much for me and I found myself crying very often," said Miss Tan, who is now 20.

The ageing of the population, the shrinking of family sizes and the trend of people getting chronic diseases at a younger age mean that a growing number of young people are saddled with the heavy responsibility of taking care of their parents while they are still studying or starting out in their careers.

There is no official data on the number of young caregivers here, but more are seeking help. According to the Agency for Integrated Care, which oversees the Caregivers Training Grant, 465 caregivers below 35 tapped the grant last year, up from 287 in 2013.

This grant helps caregivers defray

the cost of attending training to acquire the expertise needed to look after loved ones with disabilities.

Voluntary welfare organisations are also seeing significant numbers of young people assuming the role of caregivers.

Mr Jason Foo, chief executive of Alzheimer's Disease Association, estimates that each year, up to 200 young caregivers are thrust into the role, as people are getting dementia earlier. The association's staff have seen caregivers as young as 12.

Caregivers are getting younger as patients get younger, said Mr Foo.

"Some of these children of persons diagnosed with young onset dementia don't even know what to do and they are so used to having their mum or dad taking care of them, but the roles have now reversed," he added.

Siblings Joshua Koh, 31, and Grace Koh, 29, found themselves needing to grow up fast when their parents had a fall separately in 2011 and last year and suffered brain injury.

Their mother is half-paralysed and bedbound, while their father has memory losses and behaves like a child due to the head injury.

Said Mr Koh: "I have to learn about being a parent without being married or having children.

"My mum is like an infant who requires round-the-clock care and my dad is like a nine-year-old with dementia-like symptoms who needs to be watched all the time."

For the last few years, the siblings opted to stay at home to take care of their parents instead of finding



MANY DUTIES TO HANDLE

I had to think about my upcoming wedding, renovations for my new house and also performing at work. It was tough handling so many transitions.



MR ERIC LIM, 29, who became his father's caregiver after the elderly man suffered three strokes and dementia.

jobs. They have been relying on their parents' savings so far.

The need to have an income, however, remains a concern, and Mr Koh has in recent years started work as a compliance manager.

Mr Abhimanyau Pal, executive director of SPD, a charity that helps persons with disabilities, said financial aid and incentives for young caregivers, especially those unable to work due to caregiving responsibilities, may ease their hardship.

Counsellors say young caregivers face different challenges from those faced by their older counterparts, who care for their spouses or



(Above) Nurul Syafiqah Roslan, 11, prepares breakfast for her mother, who has kidney failure, heart problems and uses a wheelchair. (Left) Mr Eric Lim, 29, cares for his father, who has had three strokes and dementia.

ST PHOTOS:
JONATHAN CHOO,
WONG KWAI CHOW

siblings when they are well established in their careers or well into retirement years.

Said Mr Kelvin Lee, manager at Touch Caregivers Support: "Many

young caregivers may have the physical capacity to provide care, but their lack of experience and access to resources may be a source of strain and stress."

Eleven-year-old Nurul Syafiqah Roslan, whose cancer-stricken father died of pneumonia last year, is one such example.

Every day, she wakes up at 6am to prepare medication for her mother, who has kidney failure and heart problems and uses a wheelchair. She then dresses her mum in the toilet before cooking eggs and beans for breakfast.

By 7am, she heads to Bedok Green Primary School with her sister Nuryh Diyana, nine. After school, she helps with household chores and assists her grandmother with cooking dinner.

"It's okay; it is not that tiring, but I make sure I sleep by 9pm so that I can wake up the next morning," said Nurul, who also goes for tuition thrice a week because she has been doing poorly in some subjects.

Ms Judy Koh, programme manager at Caregivers Alliance Limited (CAL), which provides support services for caregivers, said: "Young caregivers may feel overwhelmed because they are thrust into caregiving when they are just finding their own footing in life. Even as they prepare for adulthood, they also may not have access to the parental guidance that they need."

Mr Eric Lim, 29, began losing sleep and was distracted at work by having to care for his father, who has had three strokes and dementia. "I had to think about my upcoming wedding, renovations for my new house and also performing at work. It was tough handling so many transitions," he said.

What helped was his daily mindfulness practice and an employer who allowed him to start work one hour later and leave work one hour later so he could help shower and feed his father in the morning.

Said Mr Lim, a mindfulness psychologist: "Employers should extend flexible working arrangements to young caregivers."

Miss Tan, who sought help and is now seeing a counsellor once a month, said it would be helpful if there were more resources specifically for young caregivers.

She was included in a caregivers WhatsApp group chat after attending a CAL workshop, but did not participate in the chat as she was the youngest and felt out of place.

"If I can meet and talk to other young caregivers, I would feel less alone," she said.

janitai@sph.com.sg