

When caregiving became part of my identity

You can end up becoming a primary caregiver without even realising it. More awareness can lighten the load.

See Yen Theng

I was raised to believe that I can be anything that I want to be.

As a young girl, I was surrounded by people who encouraged me to dream big and chase my dreams. I gratefully carried this sense of empowerment into my formative years and held it close, especially when my identity began to take shape. I learnt during this period that there are parts of me that I can choose, and others that I can't.

The fact that I was born as my parents' child is different from how I chose to become a mother to my children, but both roles are core to my self-identity and equally precious to me.

This awareness made all the difference for me a long time ago, when I suddenly developed care needs. I immediately understood that I now had to take on a new role – that of a caregiver. And I count myself among the luckier ones.

Why does this matter, you ask? Self-awareness allows you to help yourself and others.

KNOW YOU HAVE A NEW ROLE

My father was in his late 70s when he suffered a fracture in his lower back. The incident robbed him of his mobility and, with it perhaps, a part of his identity. This was a man who enjoyed his Sunday morning visits to the market, returning home, rather triumphantly, with all our favourite foods. He also revelled in being his grandchildren's designated driver, sending and picking them from school every single day.

With his loss of mobility came an immediate role reversal.

My father could no longer tend to his needs. He was now a ward and, in his eyes, as emotionally debilitating as the physical fracture itself. As he



In an ageing Singapore, caregiving may be on the cards for many of us, says the writer. We can start preparing for that eventuality by understanding that caring for ourselves is the first step to caring for our loved ones. ST FILE PHOTO

retreated into himself, my aged mother threw herself into caring for his daily needs while trying to keep his spirits up.

It all happened so suddenly that my mother never had the time or headspace to process that she had taken on a new role as his primary caregiver. Caring for my father was almost a compulsion, driven by love.

Without this self-awareness, my mother was unable to ask for help. When my brother and I convened a family meeting about my father's situation, it became clear that she didn't even know that she needed help.

For the myriad of roles and responsibilities of caregiving to

fall on one set of shoulders is a lot for anyone to bear. It really doesn't always have to be the case.

Understanding that my brother and I both have full-time jobs and our own nuclear families to care for, we agreed to distribute the caregiving roles and responsibilities based on what each of us could do – and do well.

My healthcare training kicked in, and I took charge of doctors' appointments, consultations with the physiotherapist and rehabilitative care decisions. My older brother took my father on weekend outings for a breath of social activity while my mother rested. And every so often, my aunt would visit. She would come

bearing treats and spend the afternoon chatting with him.

This became our new routine for over a year until my father was able to regain his mobility partially.

CARE SHARED IS CARE MULTIPLIED

Many people regard caregiving as a natural extension of their familial duty. When a spouse or parent develops care needs, family members step up as a matter of course. From figuring out medical needs to changing lifestyles, battling financial and time pressures, and coping with the emotional distress, family caregivers may not always have

the headspace to process the fact that they have taken on the role of a caregiver.

A survey conducted in 2022 by the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) found that about half of the 900 respondents surveyed do not identify themselves as caregivers despite having at least one dependent.

As my family's experience has shown, when people acknowledge their new role as a caregiver, they also start to realize that caregiving roles can be shared: that they don't have to do it alone. Immediate and extended family members can play a part, as can friends, peer support groups, and professionals. Plus, there are government programmes and social initiatives that they can turn to for help.

Most recently in November 2023, AIC and SG Enable launched a Learning Guidebook for caregivers which features a care journey map. While every care journey is unique, the map sets out common milestones to help caregivers understand what to expect and what they can do to better care for their loved ones, from caring for seniors to those with disabilities. Conceptually, it is similar to breaking down a big project into a series of smaller tasks; the latter being less intimidating and more manageable for everyone involved.

Knowing this can also reduce the stress and anxiety that comes from anticipating the unknown. The Care Services Recommender at SupportGoWhereas is designed to help caregivers quickly identify suitable social services and schemes based on their loved one's care needs.

For example, seniors living with moderate or severe dementia may suffer from "sundowning", a symptom of restlessness or confusion that can begin and worsen in the evening. This often disrupts sleep cycles, making them more likely to be active at night. In such cases, the Care Services Recommender could suggest the Night Respite programme run by social service agencies, where seniors receive overnight care in participating nursing homes so that caregivers are relieved of their nighttime caregiving duties.

While the caregiving journey is shared in this way, care needs can be met without overly burdening caregivers.

In an ageing Singapore, caregiving may be on the cards for many of us. We can start preparing for that eventuality by understanding that caring for ourselves is the first step to caring for our loved ones.

It will not always be easy. A caregiver like my mother needs time to process the enormity of the responsibility that has been placed on her plate. It is up to others around them – like my brother and I. In this case – to step up and be part of this caregiving unit to share this responsibility.

It took us about six months of trial and error, and plenty of open communication, to reach a stable rhythm. Today, my father's care needs remain unchanged but my mother is aware of her new role as his caregiver – and that is making all the difference.

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