

Stepping up at 16 to care for sick mum



Full-time national serviceman William Koh, 19, is the main caregiver for his mum Margaret Laird, 63, who has dementia. ST PHOTOS: NG SOR LUAN

Young caregivers face multiple challenges that differ from older caregivers, and their numbers are set to rise



Venessa Lee
Senior Correspondent

When Mr William Koh was 16, he ran into difficulties while caring for his then 59-year-old mother, who has dementia.

Then in his first year of junior college, he was not sure what to do when his mum Margaret Laird had problems with her credit card.

He asked a favourite teacher, who taught him General Paper: "Unrelated to GP, can you tell me how to get a replacement credit card? Do I have to take my mum to the bank or can I collect it myself?"

He proceeded to open up to his teacher, who was initially taken aback at his query, about his family situation. He had become the main caregiver of Ms Laird several months earlier, after his O-level examinations.

Ms Laird, a former insurance agent who was born in Britain, is now 63. She is divorced from Mr Koh's Singaporean Chinese father, with whom she has three sons. The older two, who are aged 30 and 28 and do not live with her, pitch in occasionally in caring for her. A domestic helper takes care of her needs when they are not around.

Now aged 19, Mr Koh, who is doing national service, recalls: "If you're a young caregiver, you don't know how to do adult things."

"At first, I bottled up a lot of my emotions. I didn't really tell anyone. I don't think people my age have parents with dementia. I felt out of place. Other parents still have the ability to take care of their child, but for me, it was the other way around."

Young caregivers like Mr Koh face multiple challenges – such as learning how to adult or navigating fledgling careers while caring for their loved ones – that may differ from the experiences of older caregivers.

While there are no nationwide figures for caregivers in their 20s

or younger, observers say their numbers will probably grow in an ageing society with falling fertility rates.

Ms Earth Poon, a senior programme executive at the Mental Health Service at Allkin Singapore, a social service agency, says: "We anticipate a continuing trend of younger caregivers, especially with increasingly complex demands facing the sandwiched generation who are caring for children and ageing parents. This effect is likely to become more pronounced as people have children later, and their parents live longer."

Singapore's rapidly ageing population and low birth rate are key drivers of this trend, she adds.

"As the proportion of elderly citizens increases while the younger population shrinks, there will be fewer people available to care for

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MR WILLIAM KOH (left), who was 16 when he started caring for his mum (far left)



the elderly. This demographic shift is likely to push more young adults into caregiving roles earlier in life," says Ms Poon, who is also the programme lead for Crest Allkin, a safety network for people with and at risk of depression, dementia and other mental health conditions, as well as their caregivers.

Many of the young caregivers she encounters are only children, who are thrust into primary caregiving roles when their parents become incapacitated.

"This can be quite challenging as they tackle complex caregiving duties without sibling support. The absence of shared family responsibility often leads to isolation, compelling these youth to cultivate resilience and adaptability far quicker than their peers," she says.

The challenges faced by young caregivers highlight a significant gap in current social support systems. "Most caregiver support programmes are designed with older caregivers in mind, potentially leaving young caregivers underserved," she says.

In the hit Thai movie *How To Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* (2024), a young man moves in with his cancer-stricken grandmother. While his eye is on a large inheritance, he is transformed as he cares for her. The film is now streaming on Netflix.

In reality, gerontologists say the emotional aspects of caregiving can be both strengthening and stressful.

"For young caregivers, role conflict and emotional strain can result as they balance the challenges of caregiving with striving for typical milestones in their late teens and 20s, such as entering tertiary education, beginning their careers, growing their autonomy or wanting to leave the parental home to start a family upon marriage," says Mr Aravinthansai Subramaniam, a research associate at the Geriatric Education & Research Institute under the Ministry of Health.

But while the "parentification" of children – where a young person takes on the responsibilities of the adult – can lead to considerable stress, he has also encountered young caregivers whose new role deepened their problem-solving and leadership skills, as well as qualities like empathy.

Mr Koh says he was overwhelmed in the early days of being his mother's main caregiver, living a life that was very different from his peers.

In 2020, it became apparent that something was wrong when she looked him in the face and asked, "Where is William?", repeating the question minutes later.