

THE **CARING** CONNECTION

Looking after an elderly relative who requires help with his or her daily activities can be a challenge, both for the care-giver and the patient.





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or some, it's a duty they feel obliged to undertake. For others, it's a choice made out of a necessity when professional care in nursing homes seem out of reach due to cost. We're talking about care-giving, and the people who give up their jobs and dedicate themselves to looking after elderly parents or relatives.

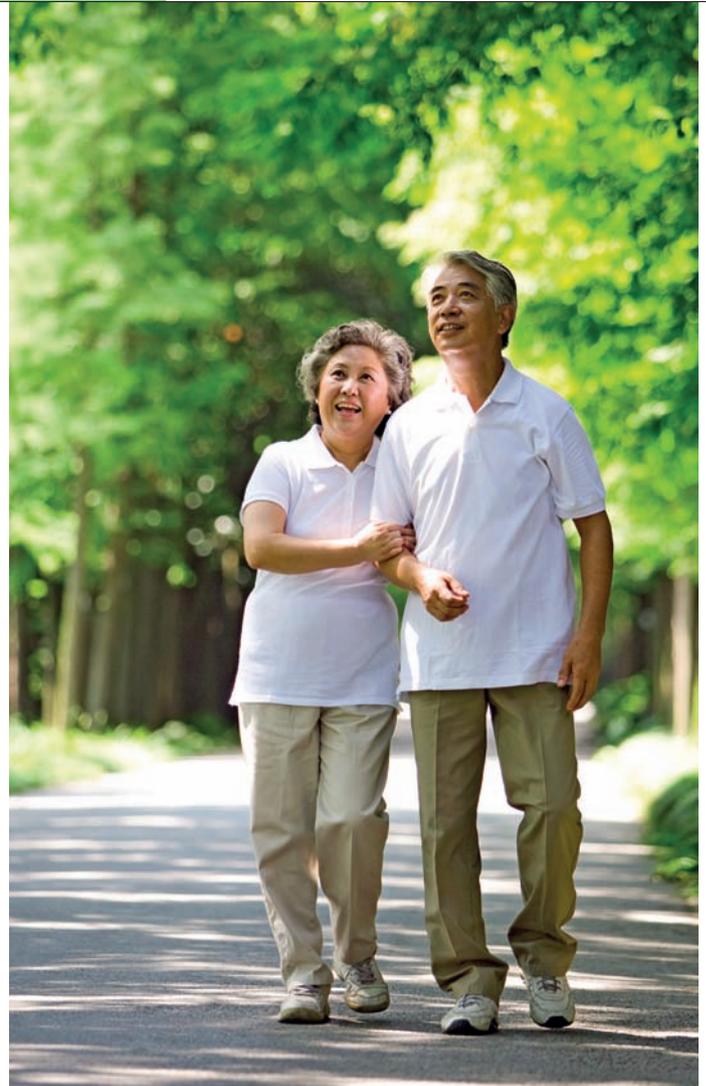
Typically, seniors who require the aid of care-givers are unable to perform daily activities such as dressing, bathing, eating, moving around and using the bathroom without assistance or supervision. Yet — as with any other senior — it is important for elderly who require assisted living to keep physically and mentally active.

STAYING ACTIVE

As we age, it is important to keep our minds active and challenged. The elderly can keep mentally active by indulging in activities such as solving puzzles and word games, learning a new language, playing a musical instrument, reading, writing, painting and drawing. The more frequent the activity, the more beneficial the effects.

Dr Neo Han Yee, Registrar at the Department of Geriatric Medicine at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, adds that although strong evidence is lacking, some studies have even suggested that physical and social activities may delay the onset of dementia and ameliorate its symptoms. Examples of such activities include walking, swimming, dancing, travelling, attending concerts and visiting art exhibitions. "Participating in mentally stimulating activities may increase one's ability to compensate for the cognitive decline associated with dementia," adds Dr Neo.

If such activities are too strenuous for you or the person you are caring for, just remember that even engaging in simple stretching exercises for a few minutes a few times a day can help improve blood circulation and boost general well-being. Talk to your doctor who will be able to teach you simple exercises that might be appropriate for your fitness level.



What's more, to help you or your loved ones move around easily at home, you can retrofit your home to make it more elderly-friendly. This includes installing senior-friendly amenities such as ramps at the main entrance, rocker switches at electrical points and level handles for taps. Anti-slip bathroom tiles, levelled floors, railings and grab bars in the toilet can also prevent falls, which are a major cause of injuries in the elderly.

HELP IS ON THE WAY

If you are a care-giver and need help or are not sure what you can do to address a certain problem, you can turn support groups such as the Centre for Enabled Living (CEL) (www.cel.sg) for assistance. Established by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, the CEL is a one-stop centre for persons needing care and also serves as a support network for care-givers. It aims to make elderly and disability care programmes more accessible by centralising referrals and matching the specific needs of individuals to the appropriate services. The Centre also offers schemes to defray the financial burden of care-giving. The Caregivers

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LIVING WITH DEMENTIA

CARE-GIVER ESTHER TOH SHARES HOW HER MOTHER'S DEMENTIA HAS REVERSED THE ROLES THEY ONCE PLAYED.

Sixteen years ago, Esther Toh noticed that her mother, Madam Tan Ah Wah was becoming increasingly erratic. She started forgetting things and constantly worried that shopkeepers were cheating her. One day, Esther came home to find that her mother had stored the day's marketing, not in the refrigerator, but in her bedroom closet.

The family brought Mdm Tan to see a doctor and the diagnosis made it official. She had dementia.

Now 83 years old, Mdm Tan is unable to perform even the simplest of tasks. She needs someone to help her drink, eat and use the toilet. Whatever task she learns over the space of one day, she forgets overnight and has to relearn all over again the next morning.

Fortunately, she has her daughter to look after her. Esther, 50, is single and used to work as an operator at an electronics manufacturer but was retrenched in 2000. Around that time, her mother's condition took a turn for the worse. So she decided to stay home and become a full-time care-giver.

Mother and daughter have been living in their four-room flat in Hougang for the past 25 years. Esther's elder brother, 55, lives next door while another brother, 52, and younger sister, 48, live nearby. This support unit provides Esther with tremendous help when it comes to looking after Mdm Tan.

"My sister comes over to look after our mother whenever I need to go out. My elder brother, who works as a taxi driver, comes over after his night shift to bring my mother downstairs for her daily walk. My nephew who works in the financial sector helps support us too," says Esther.

Finances are not a problem, thanks to a sturdy health insurance plan the siblings took out for their mother. It doesn't come cheap but the upside of it is that all her hospital bills are paid for.

Nowadays, Esther spends her days keeping her mother occupied and mentally active through activities such as karaoke. Her mother enjoys watching 'Candid Camera' - style television shows and nature documentaries.

The hardest part of looking after her mother, she says, is trying to understand her when there is a problem. As Mdm Tan is unable to articulate her thoughts and feelings clearly, something as simple as telling her daughter that she has a headache will frustrate her and cause her to throw a tantrum.

"It's like we play opposite roles now," Esther muses. "I used to be the daughter and she used to look after me. Now, I am a mother to her. But it makes me happy to know that I can help her and still make her laugh."

Training Grant helps finance the cost of training care-givers so that they are able to better address the physical and socio-emotional needs of their elderly charges, while the Foreign Domestic Worker Levy Concession offers families a lower monthly levy when employing full-time care-givers to help look after relatives who require assisted living. Households with elderly above the age of 65 automatically qualify for this concession.

Entities such as the Agency for Integrated Care (www.aic.sg) also help in educating patients and their care-givers on the options and services available to them. The agency also provides them with resources to navigate the healthcare system and make better informed choices.

There are also non-profit organisations such as Touch Community Services (www.touch.org.sg) that has a specialised division to help care-givers cope with the challenges of care-giving by providing a wide range of home-based and support services. The National Healthcare Group's Primary Care Academy (www.pca.ag) also offers a course that teaches care-givers basic skills needed to care for the elderly. +

GETTING UP AND ABOUT: SAFETY FOR SENIORS

Ms Lee Sin Yi, Senior Physiotherapist at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, shares a few tips

- 1** Avoid slippers. Flat-soled and non-slip shoes or sandals would be appropriate outdoors.
- 2** Ensure that you are using an appropriate walking aid adjusted to the correct height. The handle of the walking aid should be reach your wrist crease level. Do not drag your walking aid.
- 3** Avoid clutter around the house. There should always be sufficient space for walking and manoeuvring walking aids.
- 4** Put away any slippery rugs or loose wires on the ground to avoid tripping.
- 5** Highlight the edges of kerbs or steps with luminous coloured tape to improve the contrast.