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I arrived at my parents' home close to midnight on a Friday last month to the terrible sight of my father breaking out in cold sweat as he sat slumped in a chair, his head drooping, his breathing laboured, barely able to fix his gaze on me even as I called out to him.

Somehow, no one at home had identified that these were stroke symptoms until I rushed down from my marital home in Marine Parade to their place in Sengkang and called it an emergency.

I remember being flushed with anger as I stormed into my brother's room seconds after assessing the situation, to jolt him out of his bed so that we could take Dad to the hospital.

I almost snapped at my 62-year-old mother as well, who I thought should have known that this was not just a cold that needed some sleeping off.

As she did not want to overburden us, her three children, Mum had not told any of us that Dad had stopped taking his high blood pressure pills six months before and had suffered a transient ischemic attack, or mini-stroke, some weeks back as a result.

I was also angry that she had not tried harder to reach me earlier that day.

In the afternoon, when she saw Dad was unwell, she had called me only once — a call I missed as I was in the middle of a working lunch and I forgot to return the call as I got busy completing a work assignment.

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It was only late at night when she called me again that I realised I needed to rush over to my parents'.

All these things I mulled over as I sat in the waiting bay of Tan Tock Seng Hospital's emergency department past 4am, my anger turning into overwhelming guilt over how I had failed Dad in what turned out to be his first full-blown stroke episode.

I wrestled with the what-if scenarios that could have played out had I delayed my visit. It had been late at night, I was tired from work and Mum, feeling bad about imposing on us, had suggested that I headed to their place the next morning instead.

And in the weeks after, I could not help but start contemplating the complexities of navigating filial piety in this modern age, where kampung-style, multi-generational living has become a rarity — even a luxury — with married children typically moving out to form separate family nucleuses of their own.

I myself moved out two years ago after I got married at the age of 29.

Living an hour away by bus, my weekend visits to my parents have been irregular, as I prioritised unwinding and recuperating from my demanding and stressful work weeks.

Whenever I did visit, I felt I needed to spend time to break the ice with them all over again, as their typical answers to my questions about what was going on in their lives were shallow remarks such as "Like that, lor" or "Nothing much".

The only constant link between us became the allowance that I sent them via mobile bank transfer each month.

In short, it felt like I had not been given a warning before being suddenly thrust into a position of responsibility for my dad's life and welfare.

All along, I had little to worry about as he had been taking charge of his own life, keeping busy as a self-employed hydraulic mechanic and keeping fit with his group of cycling buddies.

Of course, I was not the only one in for a rude shock. The morning after we took him to hospital, I watched Dad, a 67-year-old man, bawl on the hospital bed, overwhelmed by the fact that he suddenly could not talk, swallow, walk or control his fingers and bowels.

FILIAL PIETY IN THE MODERN AGE

What could I have done to be a better daughter? What can I do better from now on?

These are questions I've put to experts and discussed with friends as I grapple with my new family situation, and there following are some of the most important things I've gleaned from these conversations.

As your parents age, there will likely be a role reversal, with you taking on responsibility for their care. Sometimes, this might even mean disobeying them.

Especially with reserved Chinese parents like mine, you have to fill in the blanks when they leave things unsaid.

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Take the classic example of what Dad, who has since regained his speech, said after his discharge from the hospital: "No need to come so often. Free, then come. Not free, then don't come. Do your things. Work is most important."

I reckon that what he really meant was: I long for your company, so please make time.

But even if I learnt to read their minds and willed myself to be that annoying youngest child who imposes her presence on her parents' lives, the truth is that I cannot be with them all the time.

I was raised to believe that it would be absolutely appalling and ungrateful to send a parent to a nursing home, but I caught myself entertaining that option if we ever get to the worst-case scenario where Dad can no longer take care of himself. But just considering it threw me into a deep dilemma.

I asked Professor Paulin Straughan, director of Singapore Management University's Centre for Research on Successful Ageing, why millennials like me are finding it harder to support our parents the same way that our parents' generation supported theirs.

Simply put, she said, mindsets have changed.

Dr Straughan said that the same challenges around caregiving existed in the past, but children were raised to accept their roles and responsibilities unquestioningly. For example, if you married an oldest son, it was expected that you would live with his parents and take care of his aged parents, end of story.

But today, it is not uncommon for young people to retort with remarks such as, "But I didn't ask to be born!" if they were asked to adhere to some traditional notions of filial piety, including giving money to their parents, she quipped.

"That's why this (older) generation feels the pain, because they walked the talk and then now, their children have decided on a different pathway. Because of modernisation, better education, globalisation, there is no longer a uniform model to follow," she said.

This generational divide was all too apparent after TODAY's last Adulting 101 piece, in which senior journalist Janice Lim wrote about moving out of her parents' home as an unmarried 32-year-old. Older members of the online community felt that doing so was unfilial, while younger ones defended it.

But Dr Straughan noted that norms must change with the times as families are smaller and everyone is living longer.

"The older generation doesn't talk about it, but practical realities tell us that (traditional frameworks of filial piety) is not possible," she said.

"If an only child marries another only child, then the two only children will have to care for four parents. Parents, hopefully, live a lot longer, too. In the past, life expectancy was at 60 or 70 at most, now we are crossing over three digits."

This means that it is not that uncommon to see 70-year-olds looking after their 90-year-old parents, Dr Straughan noted.

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"If we continue to impose on our children, it won't be a peaceful third age for them either," she said.

Parents need to accept the younger generation's new ways of expressing their love and respect, she added.

Associate Professor Thang Leng Leng, a co-director of the Next Age Institute at the National University of Singapore, agreed, saying that children's roles are shifting from providing physical care to providing emotional care.

She said that this trend is also evident in other ageing societies such as Japan.

"It is not that you have to be there all the time, but you can provide them with a sense of security that you will be there when they need to rely on you, and know that you are always a phone call away," she said.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

I also asked experts and friends for practical guidance on how to manage my newfound responsibilities as a caregiver to an unwell parent.

Assoc Prof Thang said that it should not be left to one child to shoulder the burden of parental caregiving alone and that siblings should discuss how to divide responsibilities among themselves.



My siblings are now 39 and 36, and as the youngest, I have been avoiding such a discussion, as I am worried that it will turn into more of a confrontation.

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But I now recognise that this family talk is necessary if I want the best for Dad.

A friend who went through a similar family situation also advised me to "future-proof" the family.

When her late mother suffered a stroke a few years ago, she ended up having to make big decisions about her mother's long-term care including her living arrangements.

She also had to have tough conversations with her family about her mother's end-of-life care.

She said that if she could do it all over again, she would have made the care arrangements for her ageing parents well before her mother suffered the stroke, so that the family could have taken more time to discuss and think over the decisions instead of dealing with them at the height of a stressful situation.

I have started taking some of the advice I've received. Despite how morbid these topics can be, my dad has been surprisingly candid in answering the tough questions I've asked him about his care needs and preferences.

He has also made it very clear that he wants to sell his house and live closer to his married children.

Most importantly, I've resolved to make a better effort to fulfil Dad's number one wish: "See you then good already. Very easy."

ABOUT THE WRITER:

Wong Pei Ting is a senior journalist focusing on issues relating to transport, housing and home affairs.