

Woman, 71, is sole caregiver of daughter and sister with mental disorders, and husband who had cancer



Madam Kong Ching Mei has been actively volunteering with Silver Ribbon Singapore since 2016. PHOTO: COURTESY OF MADAM KONG CHING MEI

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SINGAPORE - For over a decade now, Madam Kong Ching Mei, 71, has been the sole caregiver of her daughter, who has bipolar disorder; her younger sister, who has schizophrenia; and her husband, who is recovering from cancer.

Yet, she still finds time to volunteer with mental health advocacy organisation Silver Ribbon Singapore.

On Saturday (Nov 13), Madam Kong was one of [15 volunteers who were recognised for their long service with Silver Ribbon](#) in a virtual ceremony.

Madam Kong stays resilient with her strong faith and is tenacious in learning more about her loved ones' mental health conditions so that she can empathise with them and identify warning signs.

In 2013, Madam Kong first realised that something was amiss when her only child, now 44, started to throw jewellery and wads of cash out of the window one day.

That was one of her daughter's episodes of mania and she was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder, after Madam Kong sought help from Silver Ribbon.

After each of her daughter's counselling sessions with the charity's executive director, Ms Porsche Poh, Madam Kong would have long discussions with Ms Poh to find out more about her daughter's condition.

"Madam Kong will come with a list of questions and ask me: 'How can I support my daughter? Why does my daughter behave this way? Why did she relapse this time?' She's a very good student and scribbles notes," said Ms Poh, 50.

Madam Kong's daughter tends to enter into episodes of mania in the night. When this happens, she would go out drinking, visit karaoke bars and spend money excessively.

Engaging in risky behaviour, such as spending cash excessively, during manic episodes is a key symptom of a person with bipolar disorder. She will also go through periods of depression.

To keep an eye on her daughter during these periods, Madam Kong would stay up at night. But on one such night a few years ago, she drifted off, jolting awake to a ruckus in the kitchen.

Her daughter was brewing green bean soup in a large pot and cooking porridge in another. She had also ordered 1,000 pastries from a bakery over the phone.

"I asked her why she cooked so much and she could always give her reasons. When this happens, I know her illness has relapsed and won't ask further," said Madam Kong in Mandarin.

The next morning, Ms Poh took Madam Kong's daughter to the Institute of Mental Health, where she was warded.

Her daughter's disorder is not Madam Kong's first encounter with mental illness. Her 63-year-old sister was diagnosed with schizophrenia about 20 years ago. She lives with Madam Kong and her husband and daughter in a three-room flat in Ang Mo Kio.

Seven years ago, Madam Kong's husband was diagnosed with early-stage prostate cancer and his condition stabilised after surgery. But he has to keep his health in check by taking medication, including for his heart condition, high blood pressure and diabetes.

Madam Kong has to keep track of the medication her family members are taking, as well as remind each of them to take the pills on time.

The religious leader at the Singapore Soka Association, which promotes the understanding and practice of Nichiren Buddhism, takes a breather by reading religious texts and the newspaper, listening to the radio and going to the market. She also offers facial services occasionally to earn some income.

She has been actively volunteering with Silver Ribbon since 2016, where she shares her journey as a caregiver and checks on seniors living alone in rental flats.

There were times when Madam Kong was physically and emotionally drained, such as having to shuttle between two hospitals when both

her husband and daughter were hospitalised, and dealing with tantrums.

She credits her mentor, Ms Poh, and her family psychiatrist for helping her deal with her situation.

But things have been looking up lately.

Her daughter has not suffered a relapse in over a year, as both mother and daughter have worked hard to identify and avoid triggers.

For the past three months, her daughter, who was unemployed for a while, has been working part-time at a noodle stall in a mall, while Madam Kong's sister has been a hawker centre cleaner for about five years.

Madam Kong said: "Over the past one to two years, they have been growing and moving on. They are also helping me with chores. I want to continue learning about mental health so that I can empathise with them more."