

Tribute to my dearest grandmother

In the early 2000s, my late grandmother was diagnosed with dementia, after suffering from a major stroke that had greatly affected both her physical status and speech. With my father being her eldest son, she had all along been staying in the same household with us.

My grandmother had migrated from China to Singapore in the early 1930 -1940s and worked hard to raise her four children. She was a self-driven and resilient lady, who continued to collect cardboards and sell children's clothing even in her 80s - 90s; perhaps to while away her time in her late years or perhaps to retain her financial independence. She had persisted with her routine, even though her children have encouraged her not to work too hard and to enjoy her later years. That routine seemed to be how she could seek value in her life.



After the onset of stroke, my grandmother became wheelchair-bound and needed much assistance from the helper. This deterioration was not only a huge setback and sadness for her, but also for her children and grandchildren who have cared and loved her deeply. She was unable to accept her deteriorated physical status, as she suddenly found herself not being able to express her words and needing assistance in many aspects of her daily living. Her emotional state was a cause of concern during the initial phase. I secretly wondered if she had any regret or worry which she wanted to verbalise, but could not.

As days went by, her care needs increased.

I remember my anxiety and fear, whenever I hear the sound of suctioning machine operating alongside the signs of physical discomfort that my grandmother exhibited.

I remember the pain I felt for my late grandmother when I witnessed early pressure sores forming at her sacral area.

Some days, she would be quiet, seemingly reflecting on her current condition. Some days, she would be a little frustrated, preferring to be alone and have her own space. Some days, she would smile at me, gesturing me to approach her to give me affectionate handshakes & warm strokes on my arms.

The ability to sense her non-verbals, moods and gestures hence became an important form of communication with her.

It took some time for these images of my grandmother to gradually fade after she passed on in 2008. It was until I entered the healthcare/eldercare sector in 2015 when those familiar images and experiences started to resurface. Even though I was not the main caregiver for my grandmother, the caregiving dynamics in the household had imbued certain stresses and lingering worries in each member of the family. These were hardly expressed but invisibly felt amongst us.

With the dementia care knowledge gained through my work experience at the Hua Mei Dementia Care Systems, I often wish that I have acquired such knowledge earlier to better engage with my grandmother when she was alive. I wondered if my grandmother would be better able to express herself if she had been referred to a speech therapist? Would she have something to look forward to, if we had built an activity routine for her? What was she thinking about when she was lying on her bed for many hours? With such personal encounters and reflections, this journey with my grandmother has allowed me to better resonate with the caregivers, when they expressed their guilt, worries and/or the uncertainty that they faced.



Though so, I observed that the basis of care still falls back to the basic elements of patience, love and care. These qualities can definitely be felt by the person receiving the care. Sometimes it could be immediate; sometimes it could take trials and experiments. Despite such difficulties, caregiving often shows us the way to love unconditionally.

I have witnessed the resilience in my family and helper in adjusting their lifestyles to cope with the caregiving responsibilities and dynamics; each of us playing our part over the years when my grandmother was unwell. In this caregiving journey fraught with challenges and fatigue, I thought my grandmother had been very successful in imparting her trademark of resilience to her next generations.



Linnea Ong
Senior Social Worker
Hua Mei Dementia Care Systems