

BRAVO FOR BROCCOLI

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STRONGER TOGETHER

Four families share how they worked through life-changing events such as illness and disability



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For much of her adult life, Ms Marianne Tan was so busy with her job in marketing and fund raising that she did not spend much time at home with her parents.

Then she had a stroke in 2017. It left her with lingering physical weakness, but strengthened her family ties.

Ms Tan, 52, used to be closer to her mother, a retired teacher in her 70s. Her father was an executive with a multinational firm and travelled a lot when she was growing up.

Ms Tan now relies on her father James Tan, 78, to take her to rehabilitation sessions three times a week at Stroke Support Station. She holds his hand for support when walking, and he motivates her to do physiotherapy exercises at home.

Mr Tan says work made him miss a large part of his only child's life. "I didn't have a chance to see Marianne grow up. Since the stroke, I have had the chance to do a better job," he adds. "I love Marianne as much as ever, but now I know her better."

Crises like illness and disability can bring a family closer together, says Ms Claire Leong, a counsellor with Sofia Wellness Clinic.

"I have seen, in more than one family, that a family member becoming unwell was what caused other family members to prioritise the family," she adds.

At the same time, family bonds may be tested or fray under the challenges of caregiving, or the financial burden of health costs.

Here are tips from four families on how they coped, or are coping, with health-related adversities.

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Ms Marianne Tan, who had a stroke in 2017, relies on her father James Tan to drive her to rehabilitation activities. Their relationship has become stronger now that they spend more time together. ST PHOTO: LUTHER LAU

ACCEPTING A NEW REALITY

Ms Tan's stroke left her struggling to walk and talk. Early in her recovery journey, she was unable to bathe herself. She relied on her mother, who herself has difficulty walking because of back issues.

Mr Tan was impressed by how his daughter coped with her new reality. "She never complained. She's so cheerful about the whole thing," he says.

Ms Tan adds: "I'm happy all the time. I'm grateful to be alive." She does not hesitate to seek

ON DAUGHTER'S STROKE

She never complained. She's so cheerful about the whole thing.

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MR JAMES TAN, 78

ON HER FAMILY

When I feel down, my parents are always there. It's comforting.

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MS MARIANNE TAN, 52, who had a stroke in 2017

help from her father, and he is happy to be able to spend more time with her, even though he never expected he would have to be her caregiver.

"I accept things the way they are," Mr Tan says.

Letting go of the "normal" state of things is hard for many people, says Ms Leong, but doing this can help family relationships.

However, people will grieve the loss of what used to be, and family members will often be at different stages in the grieving process – some in denial, some angry, some

depressed.

"It is especially important for family members to have a lot of compassion and patience for one another and, perhaps most importantly, for themselves," says the counsellor.

"Things may never be the same again, but that does not mean things can never be good again," she adds.

Indeed, Ms Tan says she and her parents are a happy family. "We laugh a lot," she adds. "When I feel down, my parents are always there. It's comforting."

REDISTRIBUTING ROLES, SEEKING SUPPORT

Mr Muhd Akhbar Mohamed Jailani, 35, is in remission from nasopharyngeal cancer after undergoing chemotherapy at the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore, and proton beam therapy at the National Cancer Centre Singapore.

The treatments, which ran from December 2023 to April, left the logistics driver with numerous side effects. He suffered from vertigo, weakness, numbness in the extremities, a choking feeling in his throat and blocked ears.

"After treatment, I would lock myself up in my room," he says. "I felt lethargic. It was hard to eat or shower."

His wife Aidah Lee, 34, was pregnant with their fourth child, but Mr Akhbar did not have the energy to do his usual share of the housework and childcare.

As the sole breadwinner, he was also worried about his family's future. Insurance paid for his treatments, but they were living off their savings.

Madam Aidah, a housewife, tried to ensure her husband had the space and solitude he needed during this time. Their two younger

children – Nur Adira, eight, and Muhd Ayden, three – could be distracted, but their oldest child Muhd Aidil, 12, was devastated by his father's suffering.

"I was scared my father would die," he says.

Madam Aidah asked Aidil's school for help. The Primary 6 pupil had sessions with a counsellor, who helped him process his emotions and suggested financial assistance schemes the family could apply for.

Aidil was also introduced to a peer support leader – another student his age – who could look out for him at school.

External support can help families get through difficult times, says Ms Leong. Extended family and friends can offer emotional support or run errands.

Counsellors can help people deal with their grief and come to terms with their new normal.

Aidil is taking on more housework now, including making simple breakfasts for his family.

His mother cherishes a WhatsApp chat in which he offered emotional support: "You can talk to me. I've learnt how to talk to people when they are sad."

Crises can bring out the best in people and help parents to appreciate their children's capabilities,



Mr Muhd Akhbar Mohamed Jailani with his wife Aidah Lee and three of their children, (from left) Nur Adira, Muhd Aidil and Nur Arina. ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHINI

OFFERING MUM SUPPORT

You can talk to me. I've learnt how to talk to people when they are sad.

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MUHD AIDIL, 12, to mum Aidah Lee when the family was dealing with dad Muhd Akhbar Mohamed Jailani's cancer

CHERISHING CHAT WITH SON

I am just glad that you have a positive mindset. Thank you.

”

MADAM AIDAH LEE, 34, to her son

However, parents should not rely

inappropriately on their children for emotional support, she adds.

Indeed, Madam Aidah gently

declined her son's offer with: "I am just glad that you have a positive mindset... Thank you."

CONTINUED on C2

Growing closer through tough times

FROM C1

FIND THINGS TO ENJOY TOGETHER

On Dec 1, three generations of the Murthy family will run the half-marathon at the Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon.

It will be 16-year-old Kiran Arun Murthy's first long-distance race. His uncle Abhishek Murthy, 52, has been running long distances for decades, as has his grandfather C.K. Murthy, 87.

Running together is how Dr C.K. bonded with his four sons in their youth. Three of them have continued racing with him over the years.

"We all run because we enjoy it," says Dr C.K., who has a doctorate in structural engineering and is a widower.

However, the older Murthys had to skip the 2023 StanChart race as the family coped with multiple illnesses that year.

Mr Abhishek, who is managing director of engineering consultancy CKMbT International, contracted Group A Streptococcus, a flesh-eating bacterium. The father of five children aged six to 11 was hospitalised for over three weeks, including eight days in the intensive care unit.

The infection left him with a swollen left leg and he could not wear running shoes until the end of 2023.

Soon after Mr Abhishek was discharged from hospital, Dr C.K. felt tightness in his chest during a run. Doctors at the National University Heart Centre, Singapore found blocks in three main coronary arteries as well as leakage associated with the mitral valve, which



(From left) Kiran Arun Murthy will run his first half-marathon in December with his grandfather C.K. Murthy and uncle Abhishek Murthy. Dr C.K. had two heart operations in 2024, while Mr Abhishek was hospitalised for an infection in 2023. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

separates the left chambers of the heart.

Dr C.K. had open-heart surgery in February to treat the blockages and, five months later, a minimally invasive procedure to repair the valve.

He restarted his regular exercise

regimen with his doctors' approval. He exercises for at least three hours a day, including runs or walks, strength training at the gym, or yoga and balance exercises.

He says the secret to living well is to be happy – "try not to worry too

much" – and staying healthy, thanks to exercise.

Mr Abhishek ascribes his and his father's recovery to their lifelong habit of exercising. He runs about 70km a week, and often ran barefoot before contracting the infection.

SECRET TO LIVING WELL

Try not to worry too much.

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DR C.K. MURTHY, 87, who had two heart operations

CHANGE OF PACE

It's not so much about running a race, but being together.

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MR ABHISHEK MURTHY, 52, who used to run on his own but will be doing the 2024 half-marathon with his dad C.K. Murthy

In past races, he ran at his own pace, meeting his father or brothers only after everyone crossed the finish line. This time, however, he plans to run at his father's side.

"It's not so much about running a race, but being together," he says.

FINDING A COMMUNITY AND GIVING BACK

Support from peer caregivers has helped Mr Howard Yap, 60, parent his 28-year-old son Ryan, who has Down syndrome. The genetic condition, which is not a disease, can affect a person's appearance as well as cognitive and physical development.

Mr Ryan Yap, for example, is the third of four children and had to work harder than his siblings at developing neuromuscular coordination as a child.

He is employed at a sheltered workshop that provides training and jobs for people with special needs.

When he was born, his parents met the parents of another child with Down syndrome and felt encouraged by their positive attitude. "They influenced us," Mr Howard Yap says. "I know some parents who feel sad, but I didn't have any of those feelings."

Mr Yap owns a signage firm managed by his wife. He ensures his son stays active and socially integrated through dance groups and exercise classes, including boxing and judo. Father and son go on overseas hikes, often with other families whose members have special needs.

Seeing how his son's confidence and social skills bloomed through

such experiences, Mr Yap signed up both of them for activities organised by inclusive sports cooperative Runninghour.

About four years ago, Mr Yap began volunteering as a guide for the regular runs organised by the co-op. His job is to guide, encourage and look after participants, who may have physical or intellectual disabilities.

Sometimes, participants may refuse to run. Sometimes, they may speed off in a different direction from the group. "Some will want to walk. Some will sit down and you have to pull them up," he says. "Every person is different. You need to know how to guide them."

Mr Yap hopes more people will learn about those with special needs and how to make society and socialising more inclusive.

Volunteering with Runninghour teaches patience and builds empathy, he says. It also motivates participants to run better because they feel connected with the group.

Community helps people do hard things and that is why Mr Yap likes to organise group hikes for people with special needs and their caregivers. In August 2023, their group summited Mount Fuji in Japan. Other trips to Nepal and Japan are on the cards.

"It's easy to go as a group," he says. "If it's just Ryan and me, we won't go. It's too hard."



IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

It's easy to go as a group. If it's just Ryan and me, we won't go. It's too hard.

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MR HOWARD YAP, 60, on organising group hikes for people with special needs and their caregivers

Mr Howard Yap exercising with his son Ryan, who has Down syndrome, at the National Stadium. Mr Yap is a volunteer running guide with sports cooperative Runninghour, which organises inclusive sports events. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY