

# I Hardest part was doing everything on my own

Navigating grief and rebuilding their lives, more widows are actively reaching out to support groups for help



Stephanie Yeo  
Senior Correspondent

Ms Ho Siew Qi was preparing her husband's breakfast on Dec 6, 2023, when he shouted in pain and asked for a doctor to attend to him immediately.

They had just enjoyed a walk in the small garden outside his ward in Gleeagles Hospital. She was looking forward to his discharge after a week for a chronic medical condition called segmental arterial mediodylsis, which made his blood vessels abnormal.

He had suffered from random vessel tears previously. This seemed like another episode, except his condition deteriorated suddenly when he suffered a vessel rupture.

Ms Ho, then 40, quickly called her parents, who brought her children, then seven and nine, so he could say his last words and tell them he loved them.

He died that day at age 43. Seven months earlier, her family had upgraded to a four-bedroom apartment in northern Singapore to accommodate their growing children.

Before her husband's hospitalisation, they had booked a two-week trip to Japan for the December holidays.

"The first month was rocky. I was very sad. I missed him so much," Ms Ho, a trained engineer who works in the energy sector, says of her husband of 11 years, who worked in the same industry. She declined to name him or their children.

She and the children went ahead with their Japan trip, as it was his last wish. She says it helped take their minds off their grief at home, where his absence was most keenly felt.

While she worried about the impact of her young kids losing their father, the hardest part of becoming a widow was doing everything on her own.

"I can be independent, but after I met my husband, he took very good care of everything," she says. He handled the household chores, paid the bills and even planned activities on weekends and school holidays, so she could concentrate on the day-to-day care of their children.

The mortgage payments for their new home were covered by his insurance policy payouts as he had nominated her as his beneficiary, so that was one less worry. But she fretted about going from a double- to single-income situation, since her late husband earned more than she did.

For a while, she "didn't dare to spend money because I really didn't know how much I had", until she decided to draw up a spreadsheet and tabulate her family's expenses.

She also initially struggled with things like changing the water in the robot vacuum cleaner, which she had never used. She has no helper.

One of her bosses introduced her to Wicare Support Group (wicare.org.sg), a charity that started out as a group of widows in 1993. She attended its Care and Connect Group, which involved a half-day session once a week over three weeks, in which she learnt how to cope with the loss of a loved one and move on with life, followed by a befriender's group where other widows provided additional support.

"One of the more important things to me was building friendships with other widows there, hearing their stories and seeing that I'm not alone," she says.

"Before, I was like, 'Why did this thing happen to me?' But when I heard their stories, I thought I was lucky because some of them didn't get a last goodbye."

She makes it a point to participate in the charity's regular events for widows and their children, such as a Chinese New Year gathering in February and a puppetry programme during the recent March holidays.



ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI

Wicare's membership numbers have risen from 750 in 2018 to over 1,100 today, a sign that more widows like Ms Ho are actively reaching out for support.

A spokesperson for the charity attributes this to more community referrals from social service agencies, as well as members' word-of-mouth recommendations. Its members have some 1,700 children among them.

It has notified more childless widows since it became a voluntary welfare organisation in 1998, the spokesperson adds.

Ms Joan Swee, 66, founder and director of Whispering Hope Singapore (whisperinghope.sg), has also seen a rise in widows seeking help from her private consultancy, although she does not keep statistics. She has noticed a trend of widows as young as in their early 30s with husbands in their 40s who died from diseases such as cancer, heart attacks or acute medical conditions.

"With Google and social media, appropriate help has become more accessible, thus widows are reaching out for professional help," says Ms Swee. She was widowed at age 36 in 1994, when her husband, 37, died of cancer. Their two sons were then aged six and eight.

In a Dayre online journal entry, she recounts how she grieved for 18 months without knowing anyone else in the same situation, until a friend told her about a casual support group of widows, who would eventually form Wicare in 1993.

She served on its board for two decades and started Whispering Hope in 2016, offering the evidence-based Grief Recovery Method for people facing loss.

She notes: "After Covid-19, people seem to be more willing to speak about loss and grief in Singapore, and they are more open to talk about emotional and mental health."

**One of the more important things to me was building friendships with other widows there, hearing their stories and seeing that I'm not alone.**

**MS HO SIEW QI**, who joined Wicare Support Group, a charity that helps widows, after losing her husband in December 2023. She is pictured above with her daughter, aged eight, and son, 10, whom she declines to name

## SUPER-AGEING SOCIETY'S GROWING PROBLEM

While widowed spouses represent a small percentage of the population at 5.3 per cent in the 2020 Census of Population – the figure was 6.1 per cent in 2010's census – there is a huge disparity between the sexes.

Some 8.4 per cent of women were widowed versus just 1.9 per cent of men in the 2020 survey, which the census attributed to women's higher life expectancy. According to 2023 Department of Statistics figures, life expectancy stands at 85.2 years for women,

compared with 80.7 for men.

Couple that with Singapore's rapidly ageing population – one in four will be over age 65 by 2030 – and what you get is a rising trend of widows, particularly among the elderly, observes Dr Shan Wen, a lecturer in the S R Nathan School of Human Development at the Singapore University of Social Sciences.

"This trend highlights the critical need to adapt support systems to meet the specific challenges faced by this growing demographic," she says.

Besides dealing with the grief of losing their spouses, Wicare's members often face challenges such as raising their children

single-handedly and feeling alone in making family-related decisions, the spokesperson says. Some also face financial issues after losing the family's breadwinner.

Such challenges are compounded by women's unpaid roles as caregivers of the young and old, or even their spouse, which creates gaps in their employment history, often at the expense of their own financial security, Dr Shan says.

"The 'caregiver retirement penalty' – a significant reduction in income and retirement savings due to caregiving responsibilities – leaves many widows financially vulnerable in their later years."

Ms Swee says fatherless children may also face challenges, including lacking a sense of emotional and physical security, being teased or bullied in school, or missing emotional support from a mother who has to go back to work or take on extra jobs.

## MOVING ON AFTER LOSS

Widows can benefit from community-based programmes that offer emotional and practical assistance, Dr Shan says.

"Peer support groups and befriender programmes play a crucial role in helping widows navigate their grief and rebuild their lives," she adds.

"Increasing awareness of the unique challenges faced by widows, such as social isolation and financial hardship, can lead to more

**It helps me in my own**

**recovery, because whenever I help somebody else, there's a lot of reflection on my end.**

**MS JENNIFER OLIVEIRO** (left), who was widowed in 2016 and is now a befriender leader at Wicare Support Group



ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

thoughtful policy development and stronger community support networks."

Besides counselling and group therapy, Wicare also provides peer-to-peer befriending, says its spokesman. It has sub-groups catering to different demographics, such as those with young children, seniors and childless widows.

It holds regular social and educational events that encourage members and their kids to bond and build relationships in a safe space.

Encouraging widows to become peer leaders can also empower them, she adds.

"This approach aligns with the belief that through serving others, we not only uplift those in need, but also enrich our own lives. As we continue to build these networks, we honour the idea that everyone deserves dignity and care, especially in their most vulnerable moments."

Ms Jennifer Oliveiro, 64, can attest to that.

She lost her husband of 34 years, Mr Richard Lee, in October 2016. He died of lung cancer at age 57, leaving behind two sons, now aged 37 and 38.

The loss hit her hard. He was always the strong one, so she wondered why she was the one left behind.

On one occasion soon after his death, the devout Christian found herself wandering around the Housing Board carpark close to her five-room flat in Lorong Ah Soo with her eyes closed, willing fate and a passing car to take her down.

"I was very tired and overwhelmed with a lot of things to handle. I said: 'God, I'm just going to close my eyes and walk in the carpark. If I get hit, I get hit. I'll be happy to be able to join him,'" she recounts.

She soon realised she was being irresponsible and called a friend, a widow of many years. "It's very important to talk to someone who can understand," she says.

She tapped her faith and her late husband's belief in her ability to not just survive, but also thrive, without him. "He had told me: 'You can do it. He had seen me take care of my ill siblings and he had no doubt I could take care of myself.'"

So, 2017 became the year she started to "recreate myself".

She applied for a national volunteer position to be an ad hoc relief teacher. Financially, she was comfortable as her husband, a former civil servant, had invested his insurance payout and a portion of her Central Provident Fund in a small condominium unit to give her passive income.

She joined a friend on an orphanage visit to Nepal and began serving in church mission trips. She participated in activities organised by Temasek as a national volunteer movement. She also enrolled in a SkillsFuture course on leadership, helpful to her role as a church leader.

"I got to meet people and I didn't have to talk about myself but could be part of a national volunteer movement," she says of going out of her comfort zone. During the pandemic, she helped out at a family service centre's food distribution efforts.

"That first year was a journey of self-discovery and a healing process," she says. She advised a recently widowed to "take things slowly, embrace widowhood and take steps to move on".

A year later, in 2018, she joined Wicare as a volunteer and is now a leader looking after a group of six befrienders.

"I get to understand people better," she says of taking on a leadership role. "It also helps me in my own recovery, because whenever I help somebody else, there's a lot of reflection on my end."

Like her, Ms Ho has taken a more active role. She is sharing her story in an International Widows' Day event the non-profit organised on June 23. She asked her children for their permission before bravely taking the stage.

"I want them to see that mama can be strong, too," she says.