By JANICE TAI

Once every three months, it is a rare but meaningful occasion for Francis Liou, a 51-year-old cleaner, to go on an outing. It is a rare but meaningful occasion for the sole caregiver of his wheelchair-bound mother, who is 79, and an older brother with schizophrenia.

Over the past year, the group he belongs to has grown to about 150 people, mostly in their 40s and 50s. On these outings, they may visit a tourist site, such as the Singapore Flyer, or have a meal – but more crucially, they talk about their experiences as caregivers and exchange tips on, say, where to find cheap medical transport.

They are part of a new caregivers network that will be launched officially by the Asian Women’s Welfare Association (Awwa) next month. Although there are several support groups in existence, many focus only on one medical condition – for example, stroke.

Unlike these, the new network provides support for those who look after different groups of people, such as children with autism and the elderly with dementia, said Ms Anita Ho, the assistant director at the Awwa Centre for Caregivers.

“Increasingly, we are seeing caregivers caring for more than one person, and caring for extended family members and friends besides their immediate loved ones,” she added.

Experts say that this group of caregivers is likely to grow in the near future, given the rise in nuclear families and the growing pool of singles.

A 2010 study by Dr Philip Yap, a clinical director of the Geriatric Centre in Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, found that of 340 people who were caregivers to dementia patients, 70 per cent were of a “sandwiched” group who had to care for both their children and parents.

Dr Seng Boon Keng, a researcher in the same study and vice-dean of the School of Human Development and Social Sciences at SIM University, said:

“The two-child family policy of a few decades ago now translates to ageing parents having one child caring for them if the other has his own family to look after, or is working overseas.”

With smaller families and more singles, said Dr Carol Tan-Goh, a specialist in geriatric medicine at Raffles Hospital, “there is a need to seek help and support from extended family members, friends.”

Ms Ho said that the network is a forum for all caregivers, such as members of the elderly patients’ family, to gather to exchange tips and information with each other.

Caregivers have their own group to network with

At the Asian Women’s Welfare Association Centre for Caregivers, Ms Jasmine Chua (right), 40, tells Mr Francis Liou (in grey) and others in the group about the Community Health Assist Scheme. The association’s network allows members to go on outings together and exchange tips and information with each other.

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