

## Two Jobs as a Single Mom

*Linda's mental health journey started with what many go through—that is, the additional pressures from her surroundings and obligations while ignoring her own needs.*

“Mommy! Daddy!” Maybe those are thoughts that go through a new born baby. I didn't know what my first child was trying to say to me when he came into our family in 1995, but his birth changed me. This might sound awful, but I felt lonely and unhappy; don't get me wrong, I am not suggesting I was sad that I gave birth, but I recognized that as a new immigrant and a new mother, I needed to work harder to establish a career in a foreign land and learn how to care for my child.

I am a registered nurse; the constant rotating day and evening shifts prevented me from providing the full care and support for my child's needs. I was young, I didn't realize the pressures and damages to my mental health were accumulating.

Some of you may ask: why didn't your husband help with easing the pressure you were in? He just didn't. Maybe it was the culture where men feel emasculated for doing house chores or maybe because he was selfish and lazy. Nonetheless, he never helped, and so in the end, I was working two full-time jobs. From an 8-hour shift where I was helping every patient's needs to returning home to raise two children—exhausting. It just felt like I was constantly forcing myself to meet other people's needs and not my own, which probably, now looking back, amplified my sense of anxiety and sadness. Mental health was something people didn't talk about openly in the 1990s, especially in the Asian communities, and so I kept my feelings, my problems locked up in my heart.

“I don't love you anymore. I can't do this anymore. We need to divorce.” These are words that have been chained onto my head; in 2008 I received the divorce letter, revealing that our vows had to come to an end. The promises that we made to each other were over. We had gradually learned to live without each other, choosing not to share as much and communicate. It was not a simple divorce, but a long drawn out war that incurred financial burden and a vicious custody battle over our children.

During the legal process I was feeling overwhelmed; the cave was collapsing on itself. Day after day, I was experiencing chronic fatigue, physical weakness. I would wake up from a full day's rest feeling like I just wanted to sleep in more and did not want to get up.

My growing anxiety problems caused me to seek help from my family doctor. He suggested medication, but that wasn't the option I looked forward to. While I was in his office, I saw a flyer called “Change ways”, an outreach program organized by the hospital. I gave them a call and joined the group. I saw the importance of group support and eventually was introduced to Hong Fook.

In 2009, I joined Hong Fook's Prevention and Promotion program on how to manage emotions. 10 months later, I received their Case Management service. Through counselling, I learned how

to get along with my children. The pressures and changes in teenage boys brought on additional stresses and arguments, but counselling allowed me to see the conflicts differently.

At Hong Fook's women's group and self help program, I learned important lessons in taking care of myself, taking part in activities such as Tai Chi, badminton, and Happy Thursdays, along with various workshops e.g. "build up self esteem", "journey to healing", and "integrative behavioural group therapy". The array of workshops was targeted at one thing: making us feel better. The multiple opportunities I had at Hong Fook to work with staff members, clients, counsellors, and volunteers gave me the chance to share my burdens, which took pain away from me and ultimately set me forward in finding happiness. I learned interpersonal skills, parental skills and social skills, which enabled me to enhance my life.

Although I am no longer a homeowner, I have achieved a lot in establishing a strong mindset. In the past, I didn't want to let people know about my losses, but I now feel more comfortable about letting people know I am a single mother.

The most important lesson I learned at Hong Fook is that self care comes first. When I'm healthy, I feel joy; and when I feel joy, I am healthy. We can support each other and that is why I am sharing my story with all of you so you can begin your journey.

*After all the help that Linda received at Hong Fook, she decided to give back to others by volunteering for the Peer Drop-in program.*