

> SPOTLIGHT

STRENGTHENING TIES, OVERCOMING CONFLICT

Madam Ng Sum Toi, 75, is Teochew and doesn't speak English. Her foreign domestic worker (FDW), Marilyn M. Dulfo is Filipino, and cannot understand — let alone speak — Teochew or Mandarin.

Despite the communication barrier, Madam Ng's household is a harmonious environment, where there's a good relationship between an FDW and her employer.

Ms Dulfo, 32, was employed about a year ago to help with household chores and care for Madam Ng's husband, Tan Hong Hee, 80. Mr Tan suffers from diabetes and has difficulty walking, due to the disease's complications.

"Since we don't speak each other's languages, we communicate in Malay," says Madam Ng in Teochew. "Marilyn picked up some basic Malay at her previous place of employment, and I know enough Malay to give simple instructions."

Madam Ng and Ms Dulfo have also worked out an additional system of communication, in an attempt to prevent misunderstandings. For example, when Madam Ng wants Ms Dulfo to purchase grocery items from the wet market, she shows Ms Dulfo each item she needs beforehand.

"Recently we had difficulty with the cabbage I wanted her to buy for my husband's dinner," says Madam Ng. "I realised that I couldn't just say cabbage and leave her to figure out which type I was talking about. I had to be more precise and show her the exact cabbage variety I wanted. From then on, she remembered which cabbage to buy."

In more complex situations, Ms Dulfo sometimes calls Madam Ng's daughter-in-law, who will translate for both of them. Earlier in the year, Madam Ng called home and asked Ms Dulfo to pluck some pomegranate tree leaves to steep in water,



Harmony despite language barriers

as part of a traditional Chinese cleansing ritual after the birth of a great-grandson.

Says Ms Dulfo, "I couldn't find the right potted plant, and didn't know why Mama (her name for Madam Ng) wanted me to put them in water, or what type of container to use. I was worried she would be upset with me when she came home, because I didn't carry out her instructions."

Luckily, Madam Ng realised that Ms Dulfo was not being disobedient — she was simply not familiar with local customs, and didn't know what to do. The problem was resolved by Madam Ng's daughter-in-law, who explained the request and told Ms Dulfo about the tradition and its significance.

"Besides making an effort to give clear instructions, patience is very important," says Madam Ng. "You can't expect things to go smoothly all the time."

Madam Ng also advises other employers to be aware of their FDWs' needs. "I've heard of cases where the FDWs are made to work from 6AM to midnight. Even when they are done with their chores, their employers look for more work to give them. I don't do that; I know it's hard work caring for my husband, so I tell Marilyn to rest for the evening when he's gone to bed."

Adds Ms Dulfo with a smile, "Yes, she tells me to take a break in my room, which I appreciate. I am happy with Mama."

PEACEFUL WAYS TO RESOLVE CONFLICT

Don't make assumptions

Conflicts may occur because of simple misunderstandings. Stay calm and ask questions to understand the situation, instead of jumping to conclusions. Many FDWs are unfamiliar with everyday aspects of Singaporean life such as electrical appliances, hygiene habits and cultural practices.

Be patient

Even if the FDW doesn't follow simple instructions, or makes the same mistake more than once, it is important to be patient. The learning process takes time and additional stress from scoldings or reprimands will not benefit anyone.

Ensure her needs are met

Conflicts may arise because the FDW is exhausted, overworked or having difficulty adjusting to a new environment. Talk to the FDW to find out if she can cope with her workload, and if necessary, discuss strategies to help her settle into your household better.

TOWARDS A STRESS-FREE HOUSEHOLD



While first-time jitters are common for Foreign Domestic Workers (FDWs) who have to acclimatise to a new country and a new household, stress is another thing altogether.

FDWs may suffer from stress for a variety of reasons: being overwhelmed by employers' demands, being unable to cope with the workload, or simply having difficulty adjusting to the new environment. Some may already be burdened with family and financial problems.

Some common signs of stress in an FDW include troubling behaviour like sudden changes in eating or sleeping patterns (such as insomnia or eating too little), an inability to concentrate, and frequent bouts of weeping. Stress may also manifest itself in physical symptoms such as aches and pains, nervous twitching or dizziness. These warning signs should be addressed immediately, and not be allowed to escalate into a more drastic situation, such as self-abuse.

Says Kim Snoeks, a part-time counsellor with a non-governmental organisation, "When it comes to decreasing the stress level of FDWs, communication, trust and respect are the keywords."

"Firstly, there should be good communication between the employer and the employee about their mutual expectations and abilities. Secondly, FDWs should be allowed to communicate regularly with their families. Thirdly, to be able to work hard and well for their employer, FDWs need to communicate with their fellow foreign workers, with whom they can find the support to cope with their situation."

Good communication entails making time to sit down with your FDW to address the cause of her stress. Speak to her calmly and gently – it is important to ensure that the FDW does not feel threatened, as this will only add to her stress and prevent open communication.

"Many FDWs are often worried about their work performance or the premature termination of their employment contract. This can contribute to their stress level," says Ms Snoeks.

Employers should ensure that the FDWs have enough rest and privacy. FDWs will benefit from employers making a greater effort to welcome them. For example, homesick FDWs who miss their

Signs of stress in a FDW

- Sudden changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- An inability to concentrate, forgetfulness
- Weepiness, a sense of helplessness
- Aches and pains (for example, chest palpitations)
- Nervous twitching or dizziness

Managing stress

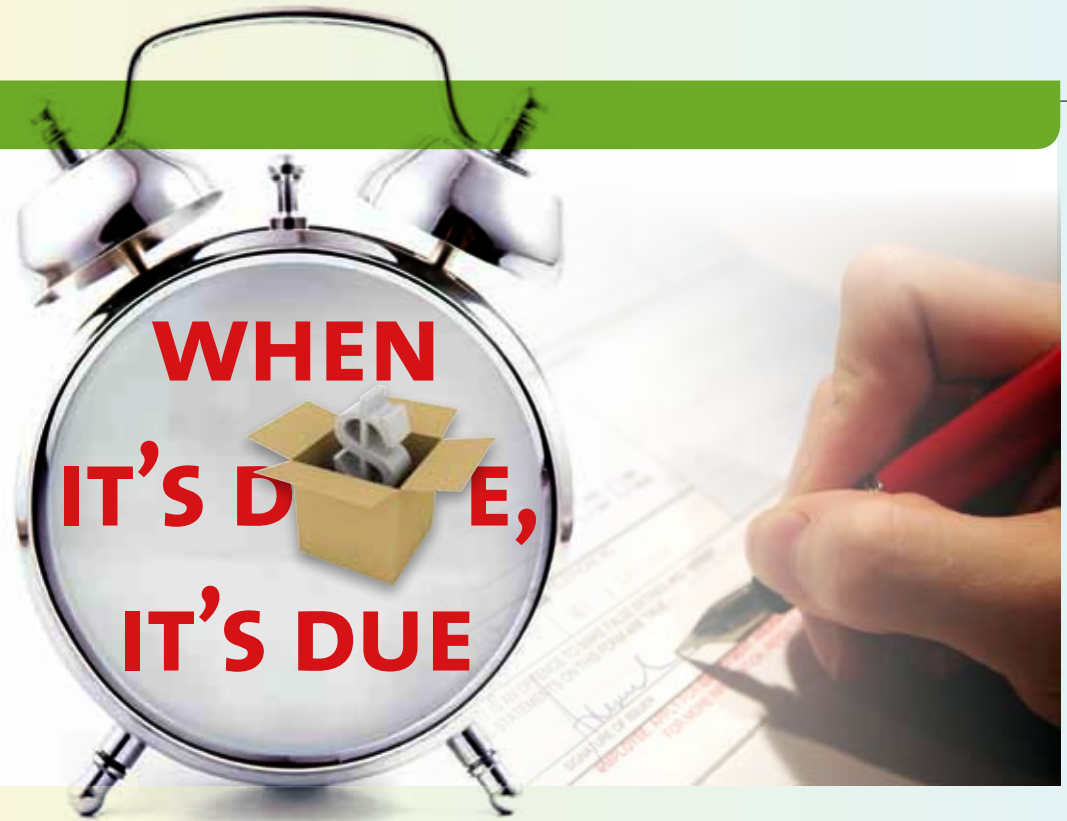
- Allow the FDW to meet her friends who can offer her social support
- Discuss with her ways of coping with her workload; come to a compromise if she is feeling overwhelmed with her tasks
- Ensure she has enough rest and privacy
- Make her feel like a valued member of the family. Show appreciation for her work

families will appreciate being invited to eat with their employer's family at meal-times.

If your FDW is feeling stressed and helpless because of family problems at home, you can help by lending her a listening ear and offering empathy. Even if the problem does not have an immediate solution, she will appreciate your concern.

If a FDW's stress appears to be deepening into depression, it may be time to seek professional help. The Institute of Mental Health (IMH) offers assessment, counselling and therapy services. Some accredited employment agencies also offer counselling services to FDWs who experience severe difficulties in adjusting to their employers or households.

Ms Snoeks adds, "Stress symptoms are mere signs varying from situation to situation and person to person, and will always require a cautious reading, in collaboration with the FDW herself."



First-time employers of foreign domestic workers (FDWs) may initially be unsure of handling salary matters and assisting their FDWs in effective finance management. Here are some basic guidelines for a smooth salary payment process:

1 Pay on time

Many FDWs don't possess substantial savings, so being paid on time is all the more essential to them and their dependents. Employers should pay their FDWs on time or no later than seven days after the last day of the FDW's salary period.

2 Don't hold onto her salary

Some employers may place the FDW's salary into a bank account for her, and dole out a small allowance every month instead. However, the FDW should have full access to her salary and savings. Employers who are concerned about their FDW's money management ability may consider signing her up for courses that

will teach her financial skills (see page 4). In addition, employers should not withhold an FDW's salary for any reason, such as to ensure that she will return from home leave.

3 Keep records

Keeping a clear set of payment records can protect you in case of a dispute with your FDW over her salary. With every salary amount paid, employers should get the FDW's acknowledgement in writing (for example, her signature). These records should be maintained consistently, so that they can be produced if requested by a public officer.

4 Stick to the employment contract

Outstanding loans between the FDW and her employer (such as a loan for the placement fee) should be repaid in accordance with the applicable terms of her employment contract. Obeying the contract terms will prevent future disputes and ensure fair treatment for all involved.

**DO NOT USE AN
UNLICENSED
EMPLOYMENT
AGENCY**



All employment agencies, including those that place foreign domestic workers, must be licensed under the Employment Agencies Act. Since the Act was last amended in 1984, the number of employment agencies has increased seven-fold to over 2,300 as at end 2009.

In November 2010, the Ministry of Manpower proposed to amend the Employment Agencies Act to ensure it serves job seekers and employers.

One of the key changes is to impose penalties on those who commit the offence of hiring a foreign domestic worker through an employment agency which is not licensed. The offender can be fined up to \$5,000 for each foreign domestic worker hired through an unlicensed employment agency.

The Ministry of Manpower will also be requiring all employees of an employment agency to be registered and to carry a registration card issued by the employment agency as proof. If you are hiring FDWs through an employment agency, you can verify the registration of the employment agent by referring to MOM's website.

If approved at Parliament, the Ministry of Manpower plans to implement the new employment agency regulatory framework by April 2011. Look out for announcements on these changes on MOM's website.



FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR FDWS

Non-profit skills provider, aidha, educates FDWs on developing financial responsibility through a two-year learning programme. The first-year curriculum covers three modules: Financial Compass Club, technology workshop and leadership club.

These skills will help them to better manage their finances during their work stint in Singapore and will help them when they return home.

The Financial Compass Club teaches the concept of goal-setting, prioritisation,

budgeting, credit and debt management and risk assessment, through learning materials and discussions led by a mentor. In the technology workshop, participants are taught relevant computer skills on Microsoft Word, Powerpoint and Excel, to communicate their ideas and handle business operations.

To complement the acquired skill sets, the Leadership Club teaches FDWs core business and leadership skills, with emphasis on planning, team management, presentation and negotiation strategies.

In the second year, participants move on to advanced management and entrepreneurship modules. In the management module, FDWs hone their skills in sales presentation, project management and business strategy formulation. Seeking a holistic approach to the curriculum, the entrepreneurship module features an innovative use of the *Microplan*; a fun and challenging business simulation game, which teaches students entrepreneurship skills.

For more information, visit www.aidha.org or call 6732 5434.

MAKING THE HOME A SAFETY ZONE

To a FDW who is new to Singapore, an employer's home may be full of hidden dangers. Here are some common but potentially dangerous household items, which employers should train their FDWs to handle safely.

Induction or electric stove-tops

Many newer stove models now come with induction or electric heating, instead of gas. While this is energy-efficient, it is also more difficult for FDWs to operate without some training. Employers should ensure that FDWs take precautions to avoid touching the stove-top when it is hot. Always check beforehand if the stove-top is switched on.

Electrical outlets

FDWs should be reminded not to touch electrical outlets with wet hands, or to insert sharp objects such as scissor blades or pens into an outlet. All electrical appliances should preferably be switched off and unplugged after use. In addition, employers should educate FDWs about the dangers of "octopus wiring", or plugging too many appliances into a single electrical outlet using extension cords. Electrical fires may occur as a result.



Poison labels

As many FDWs may not be fluent in English, they need to be trained to understand poison labels on toxic substances. For example, employers should remind FDWs that laundry bleach and pesticides should be kept away from the eyes, mouth and nose. In event of an accident, FDWs should also be trained in basic first aid procedures, such as flushing the eyes out with clean water.

High-rise windows

FDWs should not step outside onto the window or air-conditioning ledge to clean the windows. The ledge is not meant to bear a human's weight and may break, or she may simply slip. In addition, if you ask your FDW to hang clothes on bamboo poles, remind her not to lean too far out of the kitchen window as she may lose her balance due to the weight of the pole.

