

Go gardening to keep dementia at bay

Seniors also try mindfulness therapy, music reminiscence in new programme to fight dementia

Samantha Boh

Part-time traditional Chinese medicine practitioner Tan Eng Hua, 68, has been feeling happier, healthier and, perhaps, even a bit sharper.

For the last four months, seniors like her have been making their way to community centres once a week to learn how to keep healthy and sharpen their minds – all in just 90 minutes.

They are part of Singapore's first community programme to stave off dementia.

The participants of the innovative programme, which started in Queenstown and Eunos, are mostly between 65 and 74 years of age.

It combines education, exercise and mental therapy. The sessions consist of five activities: health education, music reminiscence, mindfulness therapy, gardening and a "meridian flapping" exercise.

The seniors attend the volunteer-guided sessions for 12 weeks, after which they take part in monthly sessions for another nine months.

They are then evaluated on their physical and mental well-being by doctors from the National University Health System.

For Madam Tan, the mindfulness therapy has left its mark on her.

"It helps to calm my mind and helps my memory when I am doing my daily activities," she said.

The Dementia Prevention Programme (DPP) is a collaboration between the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the People's



Seniors at Queenstown Community Centre taking part in the Dementia Prevention Programme, which combines education, exercise and mental therapy.
ST PHOTO: ALICIA CHAN

Association (PA). Dementia, which affects 10 per cent of people aged 60 and above, is expected to become more prevalent here as the population ages.

By 2030, 900,000 people in Singapore will be aged 65 and over, an increase from 11.8 per cent of the population last year to 20 per cent.

Professor Kua Ee Heok of the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine and co-leader of the programme told *The Straits Times* that the activities were chosen based on

evidence that they could prevent dementia.

The DPP is an extension of the NUS-led, 10-year Jurong Ageing Study started in 2013, which showed that activities like music, art, mindfulness therapy and taiji reduced anxiety levels and symptoms of depression, he pointed out.

This is relevant because studies are increasingly showing a link between depression and dementia, with untreated depression potentially doubling the risk of dementia,

explained Prof Kua.

A nine-month trial on the effects of mindfulness therapy, which has its roots in meditation, also yielded positive preliminary findings. Brain scans of elderly participants with mild cognitive impairment showed improvements in functional connectivity after 12 weeks of weekly mindfulness training.

NUS Associate Professor Rathi Mahendran, who was the principal investigator of the trial, said: "Neuropsychological tests at the same

time-point also revealed that the mindfulness group improved in recognition, visuospatial and motor abilities, compared with the control group."

She stressed that further research is necessary and that it is unlikely for mindfulness therapy to help moderate to severe cases of dementia.

The results do suggest, however, that non-drug therapies can be effective in those with very early

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HELPING SENIORS CARE FOR MIND AND BODY

HEALTH EDUCATION

Seniors are given tips on how to stay healthy. For example, they are taught how to keep chronic illnesses like diabetes and hypertension in check, and are encouraged not to miss their health check-ups.

MERIDIAN FLAPPING EXERCISE

They use special tools to hit different acupuncture points on their bodies to improve blood circulation.

MUSIC REMINISCENCE

They pick their favourite song and photos. They are then asked to share the memory behind both of their choices.

MINDFULNESS THERAPY

They are made more aware of their surroundings, thoughts and bodily sensations. For instance, they are asked to scrutinise the texture of the raisin between their fingers before they eat it.

GARDENING

They are taught how to grow vegetables like cai sim (chinese cabbage) by learning how to plant the seeds and how to water the plants, for instance. The vegetables are harvested at the end of 12 weeks.

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Elderly folks stay sharp, have fun

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signs of cognitive impairment, she added.

Preliminary results of a six-month study on the benefits of gardening also found that it improved the level of life satisfaction, psychological well-being and social connectedness in the elderly, as well as their cognitive functioning such as visuospatial skills and memory.

Associate Professor Goh Lee Gan of the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine and the other co-leader of the DPP said it made sense to expand the programme to more housing estates after the good results.

"Once the pilot centres are functioning well, it is about rolling it (out) to the entire nation," he said.

The pioneer batch of 44 seniors from Queenstown was introduced to the programme last September, and the second batch of 29 seniors from Eunos joined the programme last November.

Both batches recently completed the 12-week portion and have moved on to monthly sessions.

The programme is expected to be rolled out in Tampines next.

Dr Chia Shi-Lu, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Health and is an MP for Tanjong Pagar GRC who oversees the Queenstown ward, said he volunteered his constituency when he heard about the programme.

"They asked where should we start it and I put my hand up very early," he said.

Developed in the early 1950s, Queenstown is one of the Republic's oldest estates, with around a quarter of its residents above the age of 60, said Dr Chia.

He noted that dementia will be a growing problem as the population ages, but that resources for dementia care in the community will be hard to build up due to manpower shortages.

Dementia patients need specialised care, which means they cannot be cared for at regular nursing homes.

"The best way is to prevent or deal with the early stages in the community through programmes like these," he said.

So far, the DPP participants are not only getting healthier, but also having fun in the process.

Mr Gopal Kanapatty, chairman of the Queenstown Active Ageing Committee and DPP volunteer, said attendance rate is around 95 per cent each week. "When I told them we were going to have monthly sessions from now on, they said, 'Huh? One month? That's too long,'" he recalled with a laugh.

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