

# Strong social ties help middle-aged folk grow more resilient: Study

Such bonds improve self-esteem and ability to cope with stress

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When it comes to coping with the adversities of life in middle age, a new study has found that it is the strength of bonds with relatives and friends – and not the number of such ties – that leads to significantly higher resilience.

The study, which polled over 1,600 Singaporeans and permanent

residents aged 50 to 59 is the first local study to examine the factors contributing to psychological resilience in middle-aged adults.

Its lead author, Dr Abhijit Visaria, a research fellow at the Centre for Ageing Research and Education (Care), told *The Straits Times*: “Stronger ties can improve our self-esteem and stress-coping ability. They may also give us the confidence that we have people whom we can call upon if we need help.

“In middle age, one’s social networks may shrink as it’s harder to maintain ties due to work and family commitments. But it does not matter if you have fewer friends and relatives, it’s how deep those ties are that

matters when it comes to resilience.”

The other authors of the study are Dr Rahul Malhotra, Ms June Lee and Associate Professor Angelique Chan from Care at Duke-NUS Medical School. It was carried out earlier this year and presented at last month’s International Sociological Association’s conference here.

The researchers wanted to identify the factors associated with resilience among people in their 50s, hoping to give those “at this stage of life clues about which elements in their lives they can prioritise in order to develop greater resilience to the adverse events which they will inevitably face as they get older”.

In this age group, many are about to retire, but may worry about financial adequacy and life after work. Many also have to care for ageing parents or have to continue to support their children, while dealing with their own declining health, Dr Visaria said.

In today’s depressed job market, many middle-aged workers also worry about getting retrenched, Mr Leng Chin Fai, executive director of Fei Yue Community Services said. Some struggle with floundering marriages or feel a sense of loss when their adult children move out.

Respondents were asked about the size of their social networks and frequency and closeness of contact, using questions modified from the Lubben Social Network Scale, which measures perceived social ties.

An interesting finding, Dr Visaria said, was that there was no difference in the level of resilience

among married and single respondents. The researchers had expected marriage to be a resilience booster as one has a spouse to journey through life and its difficulties.

The study also found that the perception – of having more than enough money – and volunteering to help others on an informal basis are associated with greater resilience.

The perceived income adequacy may help individuals remain optimistic that they have the resources to adapt to and recover from life’s curve balls, such as a serious illness, Dr Visaria said.

Dr Jessie Chua, a senior clinical psychologist at Resilienz Clinic, who was not involved with the study, said the act of helping others, even informally, helps one to stay socially connected and adds to self-esteem. This all adds to higher resilience levels.

Family counselling psychologist Adrian Lim said the study shows the importance of strong social ties. “If you know that no matter what happens, you have people you can turn to who will not turn you away, it gives you a sense of security (that you can cope),” he said. “The bottom line is, we all need to have this sense that we are wanted and we are not alone.”

The challenge, say experts interviewed, is the difficulty of maintaining relationships, especially for time-starved Singaporeans who are busy with work and family commitments.

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QUALITY, NOT QUANTITY

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**DR ABHIJIT VISARIA**, the study’s lead author and a research fellow at the Centre for Ageing Research and Education, on what makes the middle-aged more resilient.

A NEED TO CONNECT

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**MR ADRIAN LIM**, family counselling psychologist, on the importance of strong social ties.