

Living with family, but still feeling lonely

Research finds that having a companion their own age boosts seniors' health, well-being

Linette Lai

Most of Madam Teek Mohmod's life has revolved around her family, especially caring for her parents towards the end of their lives.

The demands of keeping her household going meant she saw less and less of her friends. After her husband died last year, she found herself very much alone.

"I felt very lonely," said the housewife, 64, who has an adult son but lives alone in Yishun. "When I looked after my mother and father and all their expenses, it was very hard to go out and meet friends."

It was only after she was introduced to a "wellness kampung" for seniors in her neighbourhood that she made new friends, and began to feel less troubled. "When I'm here, my mood changes," she said.

Local research is finding that for seniors like Madam Teek, having a companion their own age makes a big difference to their health and mental well-being.

In a study of nearly 5,000 seniors, ageing expert Angelique Chan found that those living with their children, but without their spouses, were as lonely as those living on their own. A separate National

Healthcare Group (NHG) study, published last year and involving 1,919 people, found older adults who felt isolated from their friends were more likely to develop depressive symptoms, compared with those who felt disconnected from family.

"It's about having a peer; having someone you can connect with," said Associate Professor Chan, who is executive director of the Centre for Ageing Research and Education in Duke-NUS Medical School.

She was involved in the Social Isolation, Health And Lifestyles Survey, which studied a group of elderly people for close to a decade from 2009.

It found that half of Singaporeans over 60 felt lonely some or most of the time. But those who lived with spouses, or with spouses and children, did not. "What children don't realise is the need for communication and connection," Prof Chan said, adding that employing a domestic helper does not typically provide the companionship seniors need.

"It may look like there's someone with them all day. But it might not be someone they can actually communicate with. Children may take care of their parents' physical needs but they are not providing for the psychosocial ones."

Geriatrician Wong Sweet Fun,

chief transformation officer at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital and Yishun Health, said: "Friendships are the relationships we choose, resulting in feelings of autonomy, affirmation of self-worth and better integration into social networks and the wider community."

"On the other hand, family relationships are obligatory and can have a negative impact on health."

This can happen even if a senior has good family support, said Dr Wong, who is also deputy chairman of the medical board for population health at both organisations, which are part of NHG. In fact, too much support from their adult children may cause seniors to feel less competent, Dr Wong said.

Ageing experts said people should keep an eye out for symptoms of loneliness in elderly relatives. These could include withdrawing from conversations or not wanting to leave the house, said Ms Janice Chia, founder and managing director of the Ageing Asia Alliance.

She added that adult family members could also accompany seniors to new activities and introduce them to new friends. "Making new friends as we get older is very much like the first day of school all over again," she said. "The first step of facilitation is important."

linettel@sph.com.sg

SEE HOME B2

FRIENDSHIP

It's about having a peer; having someone you can connect with.



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Keep seniors active; watch out for warning signs

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How do you make sure that your older family members are not feeling lonely? Here are a few suggestions from experts:

1 CONNECT WITH YOUR PARENTS ON AN EMOTIONAL LEVEL

Set aside time for meaningful conversations with them and include them in activities, especially if they have been home alone for most of the day while you have been at work.

Do not assume that employing a domestic helper will completely meet this need for companionship, especially if there is a language barrier between them.

2 HELP YOUR PARENTS TRY NEW THINGS AND MAKE NEW FRIENDS

As people grow older and lose familiar places and people, it can be hard for them to go out and make new ties or explore new places.

Help them take the first step by accompanying them to new activities and introducing them to new people. There are senior activity centres in many estates where seniors can go to meet someone of their own age.

3 LOOK OUT FOR WARNING SIGNS

Seniors who are feeling lonely may not voice it out, and may not even recognise that this is an issue that could lead to depression.

If a senior is showing signs of withdrawal – such as a lack of interest in conversation or in leaving the house – or a lack of interest in personal grooming, this could be a sign that loneliness is a problem.

Other warning signs include insomnia, sleeping more than usual, a lack of appetite, and mood swings.

Staying busy as volunteer despite kidney problems

Nearly two decades after undergoing a life-saving kidney transplant, Madam Margaret Yeo had some bad news – the transplanted organ had failed and she would have to go back to kidney dialysis.

But the sprightly retired administrative assistant has not let her thrice-weekly dialysis sessions stop her from leading an active lifestyle.

Apart from church and family commitments, the 72-year-old volunteers once a week at Bedok Polyclinic, where she helps other seniors navigate the healthcare system.

This includes helping them use self-registration kiosks and giving directions to those who cannot find their way around the two-storey clinic.

“It gives me a lot of satisfaction to do this – rather than hiding myself at home and thinking about my sickness,” said Madam Yeo, who is part of SingHealth Polyclinics’ Helping Hands programme.

Madam Yeo started volunteering with the polyclinic last year, and has previously volunteered with community organisations to help bring low-income seniors out of their shell.

Many of those who live alone are very shy and often lonely, Madam Yeo said, but lack the confidence to leave their homes.

“Some don’t even have a television set, so they just look out of the window all day,” she added. “But when you take them out to meet somebody new, they start gaining confidence.”

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