

Elderly may feel isolated even while living with kin

Study finds over half of seniors who feel socially disconnected say they have no one to turn to

Goh Yan Han

Elderly folk living with their families may be surrounded by people but they can still feel socially isolated, a new study has found.

Of the 1,021 seniors who provided data suggesting social disconnection, 804 lived with their family, 70 lived with other relatives or friends and 147 lived alone.

More than half of those who felt socially disconnected said they do not have someone they can go to for help, the study said.

Professor Koh Woon Puay, who co-lead the team behind the study, said: "Although living alone is associated with social disconnection, most socially disconnected individuals lived with family."

Prof Koh is from the Healthy Longevity Translational Research Programme at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

The research involved data collected from 16,943 seniors who were part of the Singapore Chinese Health Study. The participants were on average 73 years old.

Data from this study – which was

first collected in the 1990s, with three follow-ups – has contributed to about 400 papers.

While the recent research was carried out with data collected from only Chinese respondents, Prof Koh said it is applicable to other races.

The team from NUS – also helmed by Associate Professor Feng Qiushi from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences – examined the data for socio-demographic and health factors linked to social disconnection among the elderly in Singapore.

It also looked at how their living arrangements play a part.

Social disconnection is the lack of social, emotional and physical engagement with other people, and is strongly linked to social isolation and loneliness.

The research defined participants who are socially disconnected as those who responded in the lowest 10 per cent of a scale of perceived social support, and who spent less than one hour a week in groups of more than three with people outside of their family.

It found that 6 per cent of the seniors were socially disconnected.

In this group of 1,021 seniors, 62 per cent indicated that they did not have one particular person they trusted and to whom they could go to when faced with personal difficulties.

By way of comparison, only 6 per cent of the rest of the 16,943 participants felt the same way.



The research involved data collected from 16,943 seniors who were part of the Singapore Chinese Health Study. Of the 1,021 seniors who provided data suggesting social disconnection, 804 lived with their family, 70 lived with other relatives or friends and 147 lived alone. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

DISCONNECTED AMONG FAMILY

Although living alone is associated with social disconnection, most socially disconnected individuals lived with family.



PROFESSOR KOH WOON PUAY, from the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at NUS, who co-lead the team behind the study.

Among those who lived alone, men were twice as likely to experience social disconnection than women.

The data also showed that regardless of living arrangements, factors such as low education level, cognitive impairment, fair or poor self-rated health, depression and limitations with daily living activities were all linked to the experience of social disconnection.

Madam Crystal Tan, who was involved in the latest study as an interviewer, cited an elderly man who lives with his family.

She said he used to lead an active lifestyle and would meet friends to play chess or watch getai, but after suffering a mild stroke, he was afraid to leave his home.

"He was afraid that he would fall, or get ill and cause trouble for his family, so he stayed at home instead to watch television or listen to the radio," said Madam Tan.

Prof Koh said community intervention should be targeted at elderly men living alone as well as older adults in poor health who live with their families. It could encourage individual and personal productivity, including paid work, volunteerism and the learning of new skills, to help create opportunities for social interaction and maintenance of cognitive function.

Prof Koh said the study is a reminder that social disconnection could become a bigger issue in the near future, given the ageing population and with more elderly people living alone.

gyanhan@sph.com.sg