

Interacting with horses: Therapy rolled out to more seniors

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Madam Tan Ah Chiu has trouble walking, and uses a cane or wheelchair to get around. Most of the time, she watches television at home in Bukit Merah, where she lives with her son.

So when she was offered the chance to try a new programme working with horses in 2024, she eagerly signed up.

For 10 weeks from October to December, the senior with mobility issues willingly walked a miniature horse around the NTUC Health Active Ageing Centre in Lengkok Bahru, and at the stable where the programme was held.

Not only did she get a chance for some exercise, but she also became very fond of the horses Friday and Ah Boy, and looked forward to her sessions with the animals.

The former fruit seller, 89, said in Mandarin: “The small horses are very cute, like children. I like to ‘sayang’ (pet) them.”

Madam Tan is among more than 100 seniors from NTUC Health’s active ageing centres who took part in the first run of an equine-assisted programme, which ran from October to December 2024, designed to enhance the well-being of seniors and promote active ageing.

To introduce this programme to more seniors, a two-year pilot called Haydays with Horses was launched on Feb 11 by charity Equal, in partnership with Temasek Foundation, NTUC Health, the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health and the Institute of Mental Health.

Set up in 2015, Equal runs equine-assisted learning programmes to improve the well-being of various groups such as young people and those with special needs.

The charity introduced equine therapy to seniors who are bed-bound or use a wheelchair in homes such as St Theresa’s Home



Madam Tan Ah Chiu with miniature horse Milo at the launch of the Temasek Foundation-Equal Haydays with Horses programme on Feb 11 at the NTUC Health Active Ageing Centre in Jurong Central Plaza. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

in 2023.

In its new programme, seniors learn how to put the reins and harness on a horse by first practising on a horse doll, walk with the horses, groom the animals, and cut fruit and feed the horses, on top of other cognitive exercises such as journaling and doing puzzles related to the horses.

Ms Ann Hui Peng, head of programmes and services at Equal, said sessions are crafted to not be strenuous, and include activities that are both engaging and challenging for the seniors.

“Our therapy horses, known for their calm and intuitive nature, are a perfect fit for seniors, especially those at risk of social isolation, as they offer a comforting and engaging presence.

“Through these interactions, seniors build emotional connections, improve motor skills, and experience reduced stress and anxiety.”

Mr Raymond Chong, 77, who took part in the first run, faced his fear of large animals by participating in the programme at the NTUC Health Active Ageing Centre in Lengkok Bahru.

He was inspired to paint a picture of himself with his favourite horse – Chevela, a retired polo horse and the oldest of the Equal herd at 24 years.

Said the former safety trainer: “It’s a once-in-a-lifetime experience.”

The Temasek Foundation-Equal Haydays with Horses programme is being rolled out for up to 800 seniors in the six NTUC Health nursing homes and 22 active ageing centres from October 2024 to September 2026.

The impact of the programme will be evaluated by a team of researchers co-led by Associate Professor Luo Nan from the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health and Associate Professor Mythily Subramaniam from the Institute of Mental Health.

The study will guide the programme’s further development into a permanent one, and its potential integration into eldercare systems.

Prof Mythily said: “In a city like Singapore, horses are a novelty, and given the experience of Equal trainers, we were keen to see if older adults like it and are willing to

engage with them.”

Citing studies showing that engaging with horses can reduce loneliness and looking after them can be empowering for older adults, she added that the study will look at whether the programme improves their participants’ mood, cognition and social interaction, how long its impact lasts and who will benefit from the programme.

NUS’ Prof Luo said the team will evaluate the programme’s short- and long-term impact holistically, including its cost-effectiveness, as well as help Equal further improve its engagement of seniors.

Ms Chan Su Yee, chief executive of NTUC Health, said the collaboration with Equal helps make the experience of equine-assisted activities accessible to seniors, many of whom have never interacted with horses before.

“Social engagement and a zest for life are key enablers to ageing well,” she said, adding that new experiences like Haydays can help seniors remain active, curious and connected to their community.

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