



Exercising alone is boring. When you can see your friends exercising with you, it's not boring.



MADAM GOH OAO MOY, 78, joins online exercise sessions by Lions Befrienders

Seniors not feeling at home



A few years ago, when I fractured my hip, the elderly man wanted to visit me. It was so heartwarming.



LIONS BEFRIENDERS VOLUNTEER KATIE TAN, IN HER 60S, who looks out for an older man in her neighbourhood, on the bond between them going both ways

Older people are caught between loneliness and fear of Covid-19 as they stay home during the pandemic



Akshita Nanda
Correspondent

Afraid to leave her Housing Board flat for fear of contracting Covid-19, Ms Annie So keeps the radio and television on all day for company.

"I feel very lonely because there is nobody at home to talk to," says the 63-year-old former factory worker, who has lived alone since her mother died in 2014.

She is among many older people in Singapore who are feeling lonely and dissatisfied with life since the pandemic enforced social restrictions in the last 1½ years.

While there is no official data on the number of seniors who may be at risk of loneliness or social isolation, a 2019 study by the Duke-NUS Medical School's Centre for Ageing Research and Education found that 34 per cent of Singaporeans and permanent residents aged 60 and older perceived themselves to be lonely.

The dilemma – between the fear of infection and need for human contact – is especially serious for older folk, who are more likely to fall very sick if they get Covid-19.

Madam Hawa Ismail Aljaru, 73, tries not to go out much and puts on a mask and face shield when she has to.

The grandmother of six says: "I miss seeing my friends and going on holidays with my family."

Ms So also misses meeting her friends.

"At the same time, I don't want to go out because of the pandemic. I'm blessed to have volunteers who buy food and groceries for me," she says in Mandarin during a Zoom interview facilitated by non-profit organisation Blossom Seeds,

which supports lonely and needy seniors.

During the pandemic, social service agencies such as Blossom Seeds, Lions Befrienders and Fei Yue Community Services have been a lifeline for seniors like Ms So, especially those living alone.

They check in on older people via video and phone calls, deliver meals to them and teach them how to stay connected to support services online. If seniors fail to respond to check-ins, staff go to their homes.

Vulnerable seniors are referred to such agencies via neighbours, community centres, hospitals and the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC), the national agency that coordinates delivery of services for aged care.

Lions Befrienders, which serves 7,800 seniors islandwide, has had to cease physical visits by volunteers amid curbs on socialising, but keeps in touch with seniors via phone or video calls.

Though some seniors went missing or attempted suicide during last year's circuit breaker, when visitors and social gatherings were not allowed at all, the agency intervened successfully in all cases.

Mr Anthony Tay, chairman of Lions Befrienders, tells The Sunday Times: "We searched high and low for the uncontactable seniors until we found them, like how we search for missing family members or loved ones."

Seniors tend to be hit harder by disruptions to everyday activities, such as going to the coffee shop for meals or visiting loved ones.

Last month, as AIC urged people

aged 60 and older, as well as those residing with older people, to stay home amid a spike in Covid-19 infections, social service agencies geared up to help seniors stay active and feel connected.

As staying home means less exercise and socialising, physical and psychological health may deteriorate.

Despite several befriending services being available, seniors may be hesitant to admit feelings of loneliness and to reach out. This is why social service agencies often rely on referrals from neighbours and others in the community.

Ms Katie Tan is in her 60s and has been volunteering with Lions Befrienders for 11 years. She looks out for an older man in her neighbourhood, who declined to be interviewed.

The bond between them goes both ways.

Ms Tan recalls: "A few years ago, when I fractured my hip, the elderly man wanted to visit me. It was so heartwarming."

Many seniors chafe at the pandemic restrictions, even while admitting they are necessary.

Madam Goh Oa Moy, 78, says: "I want to go out and go shopping with my friends, but my daughter tells me not to."

She lives with her husband, also 78, in an HDB flat in Bendemeer. The nearby senior activity centre run by Lions Befrienders has helped keep her spirits up through exercise sessions on video.

"Exercising alone is boring. When you can see your friends exercising with you, it's not boring," she says.

GETTING SENIORS TECH-LITERATE

Living alone, not using communications technology and participating in fewer in-person social activities are associated with feeling more socially isolated and more dissatisfied with life, according to a working paper released in February by the Singapore Management University's Centre for Research on Successful Ageing.

Hence, there have been greater efforts to get older people to be tech-literate during the pandemic to increase social connection.

A spokesman for AIC says: "To help seniors (stay connected), we refer those who have no access to smartphones to a service under CareLine, which equips them with a smartphone, or to the Mobile Access for Seniors scheme under the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), which offers subsidised smartphones and mobile plans for lower-income seniors."

"We also encourage seniors to enrol in IMDA's Seniors Go Digital classes."

The Lien Foundation's Charitable Organisations Vital In Down-turn (Covid) Fund has helped social service agencies get homebound and vulnerable seniors connected with support services online.

Fei Yue Community Services makes use of this funding for its Be Steady, Be Connected initiative, which encourages seniors who have basic smartphone skills to learn how to use the device for Instagram, photography and videography.

A spokesman says: "This helps reduce their loneliness with more human interaction and learning opportunities, even if they are confined to their homes."

Being tech-literate has helped seniors like retiree Thomas Kuan, 75, who founded U 3rd Age, a learning community for like-minded seniors, in 2012.

The former industrial engineering trainer had no problems shifting his community's meetings online during the pandemic.

Mr Kuan, who invites speakers to conduct lectures and sharing sessions every Thursday, sees advantages in meeting online as he does not have to wear a mask to talk.

"We find it so convenient to be on Zoom. We don't need to comb our hair or dress up," he says with a laugh.

The downside is it is more difficult to exercise or stay physically active when he spends so much time on the computer. For instance, rather than doing an hour of qigong following a YouTube video, he might end up just watching and not doing the moves.

Not every senior can transition online as easily.

Ms Ong Siew Chin, chief executive of Blossom Seeds, says: "Some seniors are willing to learn WhatsApp and Zoom, but many others struggle due to language issues, forgetfulness or medical issues like dementia."

LONELINESS MAY AFFECT LIFESPAN

With visits by befrienders disrupted by pandemic restric-



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MADAM HAWA ISMAIL ALJARU, 73, tries not to go out much



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MR THOMAS KUAN, 75, founder of U 3rd Age, a learning community for like-minded seniors, shifted its meetings online

tions, older people might feel increasingly lonely.

According to a study published in July in the Journal Of The American Geriatrics Society, people aged 60 who perceive themselves to be sometimes or mostly lonely can expect to live three to five years shorter on average, compared with peers who perceive themselves as never lonely.

The study – conducted by scientists at the Duke-NUS Medical School, the Nihon University in Tokyo and their collaborators – noted that at ages 70 and 80, lonely older people can, on average, expect to live three to four and two to three years shorter, respectively, compared with those who are not lonely.

Ms So years for the days when she could have tea and sing karaoke with friends and join activities at the community centre without worrying about Covid-19. She has few friends among her neighbours as not all speak Mandarin.

She catches up on the news every morning, but says it is frightening to hear about the rising case numbers.

"I'm worried about this pandemic and the number of elderly people affected. It's scary to go out," she adds.

The radio, TV and online interactions – such as a recent video call with students organised by Blossom Seeds – help ease the isolation.

"But when things are better, I would like to meet my friends and visit the senior activity centre again," she says.

PHOTOS: CAROL KUAN, GIN TAY, KUA CHEE SIONG

Sad about not meeting friends

Ms Nellie Wee, 82, used to spend hours every day at the senior activity centre run by the Lions Befrienders social service agency located near her Bendemeer flat.

However, new rules meant to reduce the risk of Covid-19 infection mean she can spend only one hour at the centre now, exercising, doing craft activities or playing iPad games.

"I like to play this because it makes me think," she says, engrossed in a word search game on the tablet. "I feel a bit sad because I can't meet my friends and go out for food together. But I don't feel too sad because we will meet again some day."

She understands that the new rules are necessary, but misses interacting with people.

The Catholic also misses going to services at the Church of St Francis Xavier in Serangoon Gardens and meeting her friends in the congregation.

She joins church services via Zoom on her cellphone and is active in an online prayer group.

But these are not the same, she says, especially as the cellphone screen is small and she cannot see faces clearly.

"There's a difference when I'm at home, doing things alone. In church, I get to meet people, we



Ms Nellie Wee likes to play a word search game on the iPad at the Lions Befrienders senior activity centre near her flat, but can spend only one hour there now with the latest Covid-19 rules. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

would go out for breakfast. But now we're not allowed to mingle and going out is difficult because only two people are allowed to eat together."

Ms Wee – who never married – lives alone and has no children. Two of her three siblings are dead. She remains in touch with her

elder brother, who is 90, and his son regularly checks on her.

She left school in Primary 4 and worked part time as a housekeeper until 2015. She exercises every day and goes for walks.

Her mobile phone is her lifeline to the outside world. She begins her mornings checking her messages

and returning calls and e-mails. For games, she prefers using the iPad at the senior activity centre.

"Before Covid-19, I could come here every day. Now, they allow only five seniors at a time," she says. "I feel sad, but there's no point for me to keep thinking about it."



Ms Shyla Harikes misses travelling to Australia to see her daughter and granddaughter.
ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Missing travel and family

Ms Shyla Harikes enjoys spending time with her family and volunteering with lonely seniors.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic has restricted the two things she loves doing the most.

The 62-year-old misses being able to travel to see her daughter and granddaughter in Australia. Her son and his wife are in Singapore, but current limits on visitors have put an end to her usual weekend gatherings with her sister's family.

She says: "Mostly, I miss socialising, travel and cultural activities. Weekdays are full with day-to-day activities, but on weekends, you look forward to meeting people. Weekends are when you meet your family."

Ms Shyla lives with her 65-year-old husband, who works in an insurance company. She used to work in a travel firm and is now a part-time relief teacher.

Much of her time is spent as a volunteer befriender with the Lions Befrienders social service agency.

In the past, before restrictions were put on visits in person, she would meet lonely seniors once a week. Now, she tries to stay in touch via phone calls, but misses seeing them. One of her friends does not always pick up the phone and this can be worrying.

"I've bonded with them. They share a lot of family stories, especially about their kampung days," she says.

Amid the limits on socialising, Ms Shyla has kept herself occupied by reading books, gardening and going for long walks in the morning. She considers herself lucky to have a caring husband and family members with whom she can share her thoughts and feelings.

She hopes for a return to the days of easy international travel so she can visit her parents, who retired to India several years ago and live with their third daughter. Her father is Singaporean but, at 103 years old, cannot travel. Her mother is in her 80s.

"This is a very disturbing time, with uncertainty and fear always present," she says. "Covid-19 has affected our social life. Initially, I was cooped up at home and hardly ever stepped out except to get essentials. In between, the curbs were relaxed and we were hoping for the best and that things would go back to normal, but that hasn't happened."

Learning new skills

Fiercely independent and tech-savvy, Madam Goh Beng Choo has made the most of pandemic curbs on socialisation.

The 69-year-old translator and former Straits Times journalist has learnt to play the ukulele.

She also did a course in elementary Italian so she could sing opera with proper pronunciation.

She is now translating her late husband's poetry from Chinese into English, aiming to bring out a collection of his work.

Her husband, Cultural Medallion recipient Yeng Pway Ngon, died in January of pancreatic cancer, a fortnight before his 74th birthday.

"I dream of my husband most nights," she says, adding that she often sleeps on his side of the bed.

At the same time, with the mental burden of caregiving lifted, she has found renewed interest in reading Chinese literature and taking up new challenges, such as learning Italian.

"These days, I practise singing mostly Italian songs, especially opera arias, on my own, recording songs on YouTube. I have been listening to Italian opera for 20-odd years," she says.

Madam Goh has also taken classes in Carnatic music and practises the South Indian music form at home.



Madam Goh Beng Choo did a course in elementary Italian so she could sing opera with proper pronunciation.
ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

She has joined a gym and enjoys eating alone at coffee shops. She likes becoming friends with people of similar interests and has often stopped to befriend buskers and sing in public with them. Mask-wearing rules make this impossible now, so she sings at home.

She does not like to meet friends in large groups, but has found it difficult to invite people over for dinner, as many her age are afraid to leave their homes during the pandemic.

"From phone messages, I rea-

lised most of my relatives and friends are terrified of getting Covid-19. I had my vaccinations and I have never felt afraid," she says.

Technology has played a large part in keeping her connected with others.

"We send each other music videos and take to Facebook to exchange views about books, music, painting and translation," she says. "I have also been invited to Zoom programmes to share my views on my husband's writing

after he died."

The eldest of five siblings also stays in touch with her two sisters and two brothers via phone calls. She has a 38-year-old daughter and two grandsons aged eight and four.

"I am happy to keep in touch with my daughter's family via phone and occasional visits by them," she says, emphasising the word "occasional".

"My daughter is also very independent and her hands are full with managing two sons."