



Living their best life

Spending time with friends and staying active is crucial to good health in our golden years. >2



The best thing about being a part of the seniors' group is the camaraderie and fellowship. — Photos: AZMAN GHANI/The Star

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THEY train three times a week without fail and have even invested in a ping pong training robot to help improve their game.

The senior citizens at the Subang Jaya Buddhist Association (SJBA) aren't gearing up for any competition; they're just determined to stay fit and keep their minds alert, post-retirement.

And ping pong, they claim with certainty, is exactly what they need.

"It's not a simple game to play and definitely not an easy one to master, what with the spin shots, smashes and all that. We certainly get a good workout and it has improved our endurance, without us having to run about too much.

"Ping pong also improves hand-eye coordination and stimulates mental alertness. We just have a lot of fun," shares retired engineer Ng Swee Kong, 70.

There are about 20 or so seniors who show up for the three-hour table tennis sessions held on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays.

A few of them, like Ng's wife Huang Looi, 63, and Evelyn See, 72, used to play the game as youngsters and help the others out with their form and technique. Occasionally, they have a coach who gives them pointers.

Mostly, they are in it for the adrenaline rush and fellowship.

"Some of us have difficulties moving about but once we pick up our paddles, we are focused on our game. By the end of our sessions, we're drenched in sweat and limping out of the hall. But we keep coming back!" says Teh Seok Im, 67.

Ping pong is just one of the many activities the Association's senior citizen's group, called the Fellowship of the Wise, partake in. There's also line dancing (FOW) and tai chi as well as classes in calligraphy, Chinese brush painting and sewing. The group is also thinking about setting up a choir since "everybody enjoys karaoke".

The seniors' group was formed about two years ago to cater for the ever-growing senior population in Subang Jaya and, in particular, the ageing members of SJBA, many of whom are empty nesters.

"We came to know that some of our seniors were lonely, depressed and unhappy and we realised we needed to do something to look after our own well-being.

"With the support of a team of doctors and researchers from Universiti Malaya, we now have a spectrum of wholesome activities for our seniors.

"Our programme is quite holistic and enhances all aspects of our well-being—physical, mental, social and, because we are part of the Buddhist Association, we also have meditation, chanting sessions and wisdom talks to cater for our spiritual well-being. We also have community service activi-

In good company

Isolation is more deadly than obesity, and seniors are banding to stay active and connected so they don't wither away in loneliness.



Line dancing can help maintain the youthfulness of body and mind, say the senior ladies of SJBA.

ties. Basically, our activities are built around the Buddhist values that we practise such as dana (generosity) and sila (morality)," explains retiree Wang Hwee Beng, 68.

Lonely no more

The biggest draw to joining the activities, says retiree Lau Yew Beng, 70, is being able to "get out of the house" and socialise with like-minded peers.

"I am a social animal and now that I'm retired, it's just my wife and I at home. If not for these activities, we'd be staring at each other and the four walls all day," says Lau, with a wide smile.

The camaraderie and fellowship with the other seniors in the group is perhaps what matters the most to Lau and the others in the FOW.

"The teh tarik sessions after our activities are a must. We just relax and share jokes and laugh and have a good time."

Lau and his peers have actually got it right.

In the last decade, a tide of international research has called attention to the impact of loneliness and social isolation on the health, well-being and mortality of seniors.

It turns out that loneliness and social isolation are two of the biggest risk factors for death among the elderly, even more than being overweight or sedentary, and just as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Loneliness and social isolation can cause depression, mental health problems, and physical illness among the elderly.

In fact, researchers from Brigham Young University in the United States found that the risk of death for lonely people is between 30% and 60% more than those with healthy social relationships.

In Malaysia, studies have shown that loneliness among seniors has resulted in depression, hypertension and a poorer quality of life, notes doctoral researcher T A Madeehah

who is from the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia.

"My study focused on older adults in Kuala Pilah and I found that though not many of these seniors were living alone, being connected with family and friends... knowing what was going on with family and friends, interacting and being involved with them directly affected their quality of life.

"Having someone to talk to and listen to them was important to them," says Madeehah, who is doing her research with Universiti Malaya's Prevent Elder Abuse and Neglect Initiative.

While loneliness and social isolation aren't just an affliction of the aged, older adults are more vulnerable, for various reasons such as the death of a spouse, children who have migrated or moved away or even retirement, which brings with it the sudden loss of a social network.

Other factors could be limitations that are

Communities come together

COMMUNITY initiatives are crucial in addressing the looming issues of population ageing, says Universiti Malaya Medical Centre consultant geriatrician Prof Dr Tan Maw Pin.

"We cannot just bank on the government to come up with solutions to address these issues. Let's be honest, we cannot rely on the government to fund all these programmes for our seniors and we don't have the financial means to deal with the consequences of loneliness in older people. So let's not waste any more time and deal with this ourselves.

"Communities need to come together and act. We need to empower our seniors to develop their own solutions. They need to call the shots," she says.

As part of their study, "Promoting Independence in Seniors with Arthritis (PISA)", Tan and her peers, researcher Dr Teoh Gaik Kin and UM nursing department senior lecturer Dr Chong Mei Chan have been working with community-dwelling senior citizens to figure out how communities can play a vital role in encouraging social participation among their elderly.

For two years, the trio worked with five urban-dwelling senior communities – including a group of senior citizens from the Subang Jaya Buddhist Association as well as one from SS20 in Petaling Jaya – in trying to come up with a successful model to increase social participation among the elderly within their communities.

Although there were some stumbling blocks in the earlier stages of their research, Teoh and her colleagues learnt valuable lessons about developing community programmes that work: collaboration is key.

"One very important lesson that we learnt was there is no one-size-fits-all solution. We cannot impose programmes on communities to encourage social participation among the elderly. We cannot prescribe what they should be doing because these are independent-minded people who have years of experiences; they are professionals with very clear and strong opinions about what they want to do and how they want to do it," says Prof Tan.

Past programmes, they report, have typically been very top-down, which is why many have fizzled out. Programmes cannot be homogeneous because communities are not homogeneous, explains Teoh.

"Every community is different. We learnt this by being on the ground, meeting and listening to the different communities. Therefore, programmes for every community must cater to the particular needs of its dwellers – what they need and want.

"Also, for any community-led initiative to work, the community needs to take the lead, not us. We are just facilitators. We cannot dominate or impose our ideas. It won't work. We need to restrain ourselves from telling the seniors what they should be doing. We must be respectful and genuinely engage with them and work towards the common goal of empowering our seniors,"



Loneliness and social isolation are two of the biggest risk factors for death among the elderly. – 123rf.com



The SJBA seniors even have an attendance log for their ping pong sessions.



Remembering the steps to the different dance routines helps keep their minds sharp.

brought on by chronic illness, mobility issues, lack of transportation, hearing loss and so on.

"Being socially connected has a major influence on an older person's health," says Universiti Malaya Medical Centre consultant geriatrician Prof Dr Tan Maw Pin.

"The odds are often stacked against older people as they age, seniors typically lose their peers through illness and disease or increased disability from the accumulation of medical conditions that come with age.

"In addition, retirement is also often associated with the reduction in income and seniors become dependent on their adult children's contributions," she says.

Although there is strong evidence linking social isolation with poor health, there isn't much literature on whether social participation can improve health or reverse the effects of isolation.

There certainly isn't much research on the subject in the region, which is some-

thing that Tan and her peers, Fellow in community engagement and psychology lecturer at the International Medical University Dr Teoh Gaik Kin and senior lecturer from UM's nursing department Dr Chong Mei Chan wanted to address.

For the SJBA seniors, coming together as a community has been purposeful.

"It has allowed us to carry on living our lives with dignity. We feel a sense of importance because we can still serve our association and community instead of being served by others.

"It enhances our self-worth and enables us to live the golden years of our lives with purpose and value.

"As we go from our 60s and 70s into our 80s and 90s, our programmes will have to change, probably.

"We can't be jumping around playing ping pong," says SJBA president Chim Siew Choon, 61.

"We will be playing chess!" adds Teh.



A Practical Guide to Promoting Social Participation in Seniors

A Community-based Approach

Teoh, Gaik Kin, Tan Maw Pin and Chong Mei Chan

asserts Teoh, who has spent the better part of the past two years engaging with different communities of seniors in and around the Klang Valley.

It may have taken some trial and error but their community collaborations have yielded some very positive results. Both the SS20 and SJBA seniors now have their own senior citizens groups and they both are bustling with activities that keep their seniors active and connected. From hiking to dancing to sports, these seniors have each other for company and support.

Based on their work, Teoh, Prof Tan and Chong have published *A Practical Guide To Promoting Social Participation In Seniors: A Community-Based Approach*, a framework to inform future programmes aimed at seniors.

"We don't want to keep re-inventing the wheel. Why repeat mistakes that have been made, over and over again? This guide hopes to help other researchers, government agencies or civil society groups who are keen on working with seniors.

It highlights issues that may arise when working with senior citizen communities as well as the mistakes to avoid, based on our research and experience. We hope that other researchers can build on where we've left off. We are an ageing community and there is an urgency to rapidly develop solutions to population ageing," says Prof Tan, adding that she hopes for other researchers to build upon and even improve on their findings.

They also hope that other senior communities will be inspired to go the way of the two models they worked with.

To preview *A Practical Guide To Promoting Social Participation In Seniors: A Community-Based Approach*, go to <https://bit.ly/2KcJ8nv>.



Teoh, Tan and Chong studies how communities can play a part in promoting active ageing.