

LEE LI MING
PROGRAMME IN
AGEING URBANISM

Support for older adults during COVID-19

Initiatives to engage older adults during COVID-19¹

Kelly Lim

The first cases of coronavirus disease (officially named COVID-19 by the World Health Organisation on 11 February 2020) were reported in Wuhan, China, in late December 2019; the first fatalities in China were reported in early 2020. Singapore confirmed its first imported case of COVID-19 from Wuhan on 23 January 2020. The number of confirmed coronavirus Singapore cases reached 56,852 cases with 27 reported deaths as of 1 September 2020.

People of any age can be infected with COVID-19, but the risk increases with age, with older adults being particularly vulnerable. Older adults have a weaker immune system and are more likely to have other health conditions, that reduce their body's ability to fight infectious diseases (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

On 10 March 2020, the Singapore Ministry of Health (MOH) announced that additional precautionary measures would be introduced to reduce the risk of further transmission of COVID-19 amongst older adults. This announcement came during a growing number of infections related to a Chinese

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

New Year dinner at Safra Jurong attended by many older adults. The measures included the suspension of all social activities for older adults organised by government agencies for 14 days from 11 March. The suspension would impact classes and events at community centres and residents' committees. The People's Association, which organised many of these programmes (e.g. music, theatre, dance, fitness, basic IT and career development) in Community Centres and Residents' Committee Centres, had said the suspension would affect 2,600 classes and 11,000 activities attended by about 290,000 active agers (People's Association, 2020). On 3 April 2020, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced stricter safe-distancing measures known as a circuit breaker (lockdown), to contain the spread of COVID-19 in Singapore. With the circuit breaker measures, schools and most workplaces were closed, leaving only the most essential services open.

The pandemic and its isolating qualities have affected day-to-day life and have taken a significant toll on people across the world, especially vulnerable members of our society. Projections forecast that the number of older adults aged 65 and above living alone will increase from 35,000 in 2012 to 83,000 in 2030 (Ministry of Health, 2016). As reported by the Singapore Longitudinal Ageing studies, the effects of social isolation and loneliness have implications on an increased risk of mortality (Ng et al., 2015). Hence, to support older adults during the pandemic, some organisers of senior-centric activities have been working to deliver their programmes and activities online, so that older adults can continue to participate in the comfort of their own home. This web post note

introduces active ageing programmes that aim to encourage older adults to lead active, healthy and meaningful lives during these trying times.

HAPPY (Healthy Ageing Promotion Programme For You) Programme

The HAPPY Programme is an extensive and integrated multi-component intervention that aims to help older adults maintain good physical and mental health. HAPPY is managed by the National University Hospital (NUH). It was launched in August 2017, adapted from a curriculum developed by the National Centre for Geriatrics and Gerontology in Nagoya, Japan. Designed for pre-frail and frail seniors, the HAPPY programme includes exercise and cognitive tasks of varying intensity along with healthy ageing advice and nutrition tips.

Prior to circuit breaker measures, older adults had enrolled in the programme at 86 senior activity centres and void decks throughout Singapore. To ensure that older adults are socially involved and active at home during the circuit breaker period, NUH has delivered the HAPPY service to more than 1,000 older adults through Zoom video conferencing network. For participants who are not as tech-savvy, a coach calls and advises them through the online set-up. The sessions were conducted online on Wednesdays and Fridays from 2 to 3 pm starting from 22 April 2020 (Box 1).

Mr Tan, a 72-year-old retired construction manager described his HAPPY experience,

I make it a point to always attend the sessions because I enjoy the many variations of the exercises. I try to do them on my own every day because they keep me physically and mentally active. (KAUR, 2020)

Another participant, Madam Tham (83-year-old) agreed, describing that compared to other fitness programmes in which she has previously participated in,

Happy is the only one that constantly challenges and stimulates me mentally while I'm doing the exercises. (KAUR, 2020)

Box 1: Features of HAPPY sessions

- During the sessions, participants synchronously perform cognitive and physical “dual-task” exercises.
- One exercise involves reciting as many countries, MRT stations or hawker food as possible while marching on the spot.
- Another exercise involves participants playing “Scissors, Paper, Stone” while marching, but the twist is that they play to lose (not to win), highlighting the collaborative play style rather than a competitive play style of the exercise.

Source: KAUR, A. (2020). Happy to beat isolation. *The Straits Times*

NAC – Silver Arts Festival

Hosted by the National Arts Council (NAC) since 2012, Silver Arts is an annual festival devoted to celebrating older adults and creative ageing by promoting social involvement and shared experience through the arts. The festival explores and promotes partnerships among artists, art institutions, and community stakeholders to integrate the arts into older adults’ lifestyles and wellbeing.

In 2020, for the first time in 9 years, the Silver Arts festival will deliver its full content through the Silver Arts Facebook platform to ensure older adults’ welfare and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Silver Arts 2020 will span across two weeks, from 1 to 13 September, broadcast from 2 pm daily on the Silver Arts Facebook page. Older adults can look forward to storytelling, concerts, musical performances by different cultural groups, and interactive workshops (Box 2).

There are many favourable comments on the Facebook platform, praising the activities such as the introductory workshop and dance performance. Viewer Susan Teo commented,

Thanks for sharing this workshop. I enjoyed watching (and) learning it very much. (NAC Facebook, 2020)

Box 2: Programme on Day 7, September 7: Chronicles of Life Movement by Flamenco Sin Fronteras

- Chronicles of Life 2020 presents flamenco music and dance in a

lively and supportive atmosphere as older adults perform and share their experiences alongside Flamenco Sin Fronteras dancers.

- Viewers at home are encouraged to follow simple flamenco dance moves like stamp, tap, clapping, and hand movements.

Source: NAC – Silver Arts. (2020).



Photo 1: A screenshot of the Chronicles of Life video posted on Facebook. (Image Credit: National Arts Council)

Letters of connection

Internationally, there have been other initiatives to engage older adults during the pandemic. One initiative to facilitate the connection between people (in different places, of different ages and backgrounds) is letters of connection, which brings people together through old-fashioned letter writing. Examples include,

- Letters Against Isolation (USA);
- One Letter, One Smile initiative (United Kingdom, Canada, France, Belgium, USA, Luxembourg and Switzerland);
- Village Concepts Senior Pen Pal Program (USA) (Box 3).

All these programmes have something in common; they aim to fight loneliness with love and words of encouragement for older adults. In the digital age, words on paper are a novelty that we often overlook. With no evidence that COVID-19 can spread through the mail, these programmes connect older adults, including those in quarantine; they can receive letters from families and senders from different parts of the world.

Box 3: Features of the Village Concepts Pen Pal Program, USA

- Conversation points - the programme gives older adults the opportunity to receive letters and cards from children and families and discuss topics of joint interest such as cooking, pets, hobbies, etc.
- Intergeneration communication - the programme connects older adults in quarantine in assisted living with children at home during the pandemic.
- Safe handling - the programme matches residents of the Village Concepts Retirement Communities in the USA with children and safely handles the letters before distribution to the older adults.

Source: Village Concepts (2020)



Photo 2: A resident (83-year-old) at Country Meadow Village, composes a letter to a first grader in the Sedro-Woolley School District. She described her pen pal partner. “She wrote a beautiful letter ... For someone in the first grade, she’s a fantastic writer.” (Image Credit: Village Concepts)

Conclusion

Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities for improving the lives of older adults may yet emerge from this crisis. Many of these opportunities pertain to increased connectivity through technology, promoting active ageing through digital participation. While the digital platform has the potential to connect people and improve their skills, technology can often pose a challenge for older adults, especially those who are less tech-savvy as they may lack the knowledge and skills to surf the digital world. Coach and phone calls are mobilised to assist those who are less familiar with technology use.

Before the pandemic, they may not have the motivation to stay connected through technology, but with the pandemic, more are learning, joining the internet community, and becoming more digitally-savvy. At the same time, many have revived common past practices such as letter writing to reach out and be in the

company of others who share a similar interest. The essence is about helping older people to remain socially connected during the physical distancing of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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