



Senior citizens learning linocut as part of their printmaking lesson with artist Felicia Low at NTUC Health SilverACE (Taman Jurong) earlier this month. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

Studying the art to ageing well

An expert shares three ways to grow old gracefully



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There are three keys to ageing well, says psychiatrist Kua Ee Heok.

The first is education, arming oneself with knowledge of health issues affecting the elderly. "Learn about the risk factors – what are diabetes, hypertension, diet, et cetera," says Prof Kua, senior consultant psychiatrist at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) department of psychological medicine.

Physical symptoms such as high blood pressure and hypertension contribute to the risk factors for vascular dementia, when mental capacity is impacted by physical events such as a stroke.

To age well, it is also key that one has the ability to stay calm and deal with tension and anxiety.

This is why Prof Kua is studying various strategies for mindfulness and meditation, ranging from forest walks to calligraphy lessons, and their effects on mental well-being.

In fact, the 70-year-old has received a donation from the estate of renowned ink painter Fan Chang Tien to help fund a Singapore-Shanghai study on how practising calligraphy can affect mental health. It is the first time such a study about the Chinese art of writing will be done concurrently in two cities.

The third key to ageing well, Prof Kua says, is mental stimulation with aid of the arts – be it music, drawing or other cultural and heritage pursuits.

Using the arts as a means of staving off mental decline has been the subject of two papers published by Prof Kua and his team of fellow academics which have generated much headline-grabbing attention in recent years.

The psychiatrist has conducted various studies on the mental health of the elderly in Singapore and has accumulated practical

knowledge about the perils of mental deterioration over the course of his lengthy career.

Prof Kua says he first noticed during a research stint in Cambridge, England, in 1984 that dementia diagnoses were often a death sentence for patients in the West, who were expected to live an average of only five years after being diagnosed.

At that time, drug trials to treat dementia were also failing. He began to wonder about non-drug alternatives for dealing with dementia, partly triggered by his experiences in Singapore.

After he started a dementia clinic at the National University of Singapore Hospital in 1990, he found that "patients with dementia lived on 12 to 16 years" here – a drastic contrast with patient expectancy rates in the West.

He realised there was a critical difference in care. "Almost all the patients we have lived with family," he explains.

"Family care is important in lengthening the life expectancy of patients. The elderly live in homes in the West. It's a very custodial experience versus family care."

Beyond familial care, Prof Kua began exploring other alternatives, starting with a dementia prevention programme, a project of the NUS Mind-Science Centre at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, at a clinic at Jurong Point.

Clinicians took brain scans and blood samples of senior citizens before the patients took assorted art and music therapy classes as well as mindfulness and taiji lessons.

Patients were happier and could focus better after such exposure to arts and culture. Paintings, Prof Kua observes, are enriched with the artists' imagination in a way that mere photographs are not. But there are caveats to the study,

Tips from the expert for mental well-being

1

EDUCATION
Learn what health issues affect the elderly

2

ABILITY TO STAY CALM
Use various strategies to deal with tension and anxiety

3

MENTAL STIMULATION
With aid of the arts, such as music, drawing and cultural heritage



Engaging in artistic pursuits encourages mental well-being and exposes participants to more social interaction as well, says psychiatrist Kua Ee Heok. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

whose principal investigator Rathi Mahendran is senior consultant psychiatrist at the Mind-Science Centre.

Prof Kua says: "In terms of responding, people respond to music first, then art."

But it is not simply a matter of just listening to music or looking at art. For visual arts, Prof Kua organised training sessions for the Na-

tion Gallery Singapore's docents. They were taught to engage senior citizens with questions.

Prof Kua explains: "You see a painting like Chua Mia Tee's National Language Class, you know it's Singapore in the 1960s. The art reminds people of 1960s Singapore. It is not just a painting, but also a trigger. Art is reminiscence."

Art and music help trigger the hippocampus in the brain, he adds, where one's memories are stored. While many people worry about dementia, Prof Kua notes that depression is a far more serious issue with the elderly, as depression and loneliness contribute to the suicide rate.

In his studies, it is not simply engaging in artistic pursuits that encourages mental well-being. The participants in the studies are exposed to more social interaction, from meeting for art therapy classes to going for museum outings in groups.

Prof Kua notes that studies are ongoing as his team members evolve their methodologies and find new avenues, such as volunteerism, to explore.

There are also other demographics to investigate. The Jurong Point studies were focused on working-class retirees and he is looking to develop studies for the middle-class demographic.

Even as the studies evolve and take on more issues, he says there is a need to look at how the findings can translate effectively to the wider community.

A positive impact on a sample group of senior citizens taking art and music therapy is one thing. How to expand those techniques to a wider audience and measure their effects is the next step.

Prof Kua says his team is working with organisations, such as the People's Association, which have a wider reach and the necessary infrastructure to track and measure outcomes.

As longevity rates increase, he acknowledges that everyone wants to know how to age well and better.

There is no silver bullet. But keeping informed and staying engaged with the world and the arts are good ways to start.

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