Coronavirus Pandemic

Happy to beat isolation

The Healthy Ageing Promotion Programme For You, or Happy, has gone online to help seniors stay active and busy during the circuit breaker period

Amrita Kaur

A programme called Happy has kept seniors Tham (left) and active end of March, even now with the circuit breaker measures in place.

The 73-year-old is among the seniors taking part in the physical exercise programmes called Healthy Ageing Promotion Programme For You (Happy), which has helped senior citizens improve their mental well-being, memory, functional ability and strength.

A study found that about one in two seniors aged 60 and above in Singapore are at risk of social isolation, given their limited mobility, age-related physiological changes and the propensity to develop frailty.

The study on 572 seniors released last month by researchers from the National University Hospital (NUH) and National University of Singapore (NUS) Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine found that half had a weekly score below 60, a score that is associated with social isolation, and such isolation has been shown to lead to an increase in hospital readmissions, disease and death.

Associate Professor Rosaline Marchant, who heads the Division of Geriatric Medicine at NUH, says, "It is a rising public health concern globally, given its link to poor health status, impaired mobility and cognitive function."

But it is not just for those who have mobility with their physical movements. Seniors can improve their mobility and fitness by performing simple exercises, adds Prof Marchant, a principal investigator of the study.

In a bid to help mitigate the impact of Covid-19 and ensure that seniors are socially engaged and active at home during the circuit breaker, NHG has introduced the Happy programme to more than 1,000 seniors through video-conferencing platform Zoom.

Before the circuit breaker measures were announced, seniors had been participating in the programme at the senior activity centres and void decks across Singapore.

Since April 22, the seniors have been held online on Wednesdays and Fridays from 1.30pm. Happy, which is run by NHG, started in 2017 and was adapted from a programme designed by the National Centre for Geriatrics and Gerontology in Nagoya, Japan.

Participants simultaneously perform cognitive and physical "duel" exercises.

For example, one involves marching on the spot while counting backwards from 20 and clapping on every third number.

Another has seniors reciting as many countries, MRT stations or how many feet as possible while marching on the spot.

The programme also aims to encourage seniors to take charge of their health, such as by teaching them to take their own blood pressure and pulse.

For Madam Tham, Happy is unlike other exercise programmes she had been involved in.

Madam Tham, who used to work

Tips for seniors to beat isolation

Pick up a new hobby

Hobbies can keep seniors motivated and make passing the time enjoyable.

Some hobbies ideal for seniors and those with impaired mobility include sewing, arts and crafts and learning to play a new instrument.

They can also be useful when pursuing a hobby, such as finding a new way to add to their collection of knick-knacks, for a friend's first birthday.

Stay connected with the community

Seniors can get involved in various volunteering opportunities such as helping out at local schools or in low-income families. They can also volunteer to help others.

Volunteering for such tasks and engaging with the community will give seniors a sense of purpose and a chance to help others.

Seniors can also contribute to mental health and well-being research.

Among the local organisations are the Singapore National Council of Social Service, the Singapore Federation of Amateur Radio Clubs, and the Singapore Voluntary Welfare Organisations (Volvo) and Lions Foundation.

To find out more, seniors can check the websites and social media pages of organisations they are interested in.

Exercise in the park or neighbourhood

Take a walk in the neighbourhood or doing simple exercises in the park can help seniors feel better.

Even though safe distancing still has to be observed, a simple interaction with another human being through a wave or a smile can help ease off feelings of loneliness.

Choose home-based services

A weekly delivery home-based service that can include elder-sitting and engagement, especially for home-bound seniors, can be arranged to help ease the sense of isolation.

Even just one or two, once or twice a week, in solitude a journey to support seniors and prevent them from feeling lonely.

Staff of senior care centres, active ageing hubs and senior activity centres keep in touch with their senior clients to check on their physical and emotional well-being during the closure of the centres due to the circuit breaker.

Create routine

Having a routine can help seniors better handle their emotions. An active routine, which includes household chores, walking or exercising, engaging in a creative activity that is interesting and helping with household chores, helps prevent seniors from feeling anxious and disruptive during the circuit breaker.

Set simple, small achievable goals

Setting simple, achievable goals can help seniors improve their mood and keep them motivated.

This could include looking at a special recipe, cleaning up the room or opening a book for leisure reading.

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Social distancing is not social isolation

Prof Merchant says simple exercises, such as stretching, marching forward and backwards, and holding water bottles and drink cans, can be done easily at home.

"We need to get the messaging right that social distancing is not social isolation, and seniors can continue to be active and socially engaged through a programme like this," she says.

She also cautions that a sedentary lifestyle, such as eating and sitting around daily, can lead to muscle wasting, weakness, falls and functional decline, and may worsen memory problems.

Strong social network is associated with better memory and has a protective effect against the development of dementia and depression.

Mr Sarin Sandrasegar, who has been conducting the programme since August 2017 at the Choa Chu Kang Fei Yue Retirement Centre, says:

"The most obvious difference is that the seniors have become a lot more energetic and happy."

"Their walking ability has also improved. We have some seniors with a history of falling. Most of them have shared feedback that they are more confident to walk and some even don’t require the use of a walking aid now," says Mr Sandrasegar, a manager at NUH’s Division of Geriatric Medicine.

The 30-year-old, who can also speak Mandarin, says it is heartening to see that the seniors look forward to the programme when they see the benefits, and also interact with their newfound friends.

He says there are more than 100 variations of exercises in the programme and he always tries to do something different every lesson to keep the seniors interested.

The sessions are led by a team of four full-time coaches. Though the programme is targeted at seniors, there is no age criteria for joining.

For seniors who are not as tech-savvy, a coach calls and guides them through the online set-up on a desktop computer or tablet, sometimes with the help of a family member.

Ms Tan Peck Liang, who has been attending the sessions at Bukit Panjang Community Centre since December 2018, loves the range of exercises in the programme.

"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," says the 72-year-old retired construction manager.

Now, he uses his smartphone to take part in the programme on Zoom, with the help of his 40-year-old daughter, who set it up for him.

He says that thanks to the "unique exercises", his stiff joints are now more flexible, his blood pressure is down and his memory is better.

"I have more friends now compared with before I joined the programme. I meet fellow seniors from all walks of life. It’s interesting to talk to them because they all have different views on things."