



STRESSED BY THE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK? CONTACT THESE HELPLINES

FOR THE ELDERLY:

The Seniors Helpline (by Sage Counselling Centre): 1800-555-5555

Counselling for Older Persons (by O'Joy Care Services): 6749-0190

Hua Mei Counselling and Coaching (by Tsao Foundation): 6593-9549

FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC:

Silver Ribbon: 6385-3714, 6386-1928 or 6509-0271

Samaritans Of Singapore (SOS): 1800-221-4444 (24-hour)

Institute of Mental Health's Mobile Crisis Service: 6389-2222 (24-hour)

Care Corner Counselling Centre (for Mandarin speakers): 1800-353-5800
Singapore Association For Mental Health: 1800-283-7019

Retiree Sitabai Mohan keeping her mind active to prevent dementia by completing a word search on March 21. Madam Mohan has been taking the social-distancing measures in her stride. She also does some simple exercises such as walking to the bus stop and other places. ST PHOTO: JOEL CHAN

Coronavirus pandemic

Elderly have to focus on their health amid social distancing

If not, social isolation may result as activities organised for them are suspended to contain spread of coronavirus

Melissa Yip

Elderly people need to take greater care of their emotional and physical well-being, as social and fitness activities organised by government agencies for seniors are suspended further to contain the coronavirus spread, said experts.

Lack of meaningful activity engagement and less face time with other people could result in social isolation, boredom and possible low mood in the longer term, said senior psychologist June Lim from the department of psychology at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH).

"This is especially so for the elderly who are more vulnerable to isolation and loneliness."

Activities for seniors run by government agencies had been suspended for two weeks from March

11. The suspension was further extended to April 7, and now, April 30.

They include classes and activities at community and residents' committee centres in areas such as music, dance, exercise and basic IT courses. The People's Association, which runs these activities, said the suspension affects 2,600 classes and 11,000 activities attended by about 290,000 participants.

To keep boredom and loneliness at bay, Ms Lim recommends elderly people connect virtually with their friends via video calls, or download games on their tablets or phones to keep themselves engaged.

They could also go for short walks in the neighbourhood or bond with loved ones.

Retiree Sitabai Mohan is an example of a senior who takes the social-distancing measures in her stride. "You must take care of yourself as

the Government can help with only certain things. Covid-19 is a temporary thing and everything will become normal and fine," she said.

Madam Mohan, who is in her 70s, spends most of her time watching dramas on YouTube at home as well as listening to Christian worship songs and testimonies.

She goes out once or twice a week but makes sure to avoid crowded places. While she no longer plays weekly card games with her friends at the Singapore Swimming Club, they still check on one another regularly to ensure everyone is well.

Madam Mohan also does some simple exercises such as walking to the bus stop and other places.

While avoiding social activities would keep seniors safe, such social-distancing measures could take a toll on their physical health as well.

Senior physiotherapist Ooi Bee Yin from the department of physiotherapy at TTSH said that "lack of exercise may result in numerous health problems in the long run. It may increase the likelihood of de-

veloping chronic diseases, such as diabetes, high blood pressure or high cholesterol".

Besides achieving at least 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity physical activity, such as brisk walking, cycling or swimming, older adults should aim to include strength and balance exercises at least twice a week. Balance exercises improve the ability to control the body's position and maintain stability when standing still or moving.

"In this Covid-19 situation, we can continue our exercise routine even at home," said Ms Ooi (see story below).

For retiree J. Wee, 78, the stricter measures have not stopped her from practising yoga, which she has been doing for the past 40 years. "Physically, I feel good, more relaxed and not easily tired," she said in Mandarin, citing the benefits of exercise.

Madam Wee attends hatha yoga classes twice a week at the Awareness Hub, a department under Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery, which runs wellness

programmes. Each class has fewer than 10 students and lasts for 60 to 90 minutes. With further social-distancing measures announced by the Government, however, these classes may be suspended or replaced by live streaming where possible, said a monastery spokesman.

Madam Wee also goes for weekly singing lessons – a small class with just herself and a friend.

Without organised activities, other seniors may not have much to do at home and such isolation can be harmful emotionally.

Ms Lim said it is important for the elderly to be aware of negative self-talk that could result in a low mood and they should seek appropriate professional help for it.

Executive director Grace Lee of Sage Counselling Centre said: "Some (elderly people) may experience fear or anxiety regarding Covid-19 so it is even more important to reach out to them."

The non-profit group runs The Seniors Helpline for people aged 50 and above and their caregivers. It offers a listening ear to their problems and provides information or referrals on eldercare services.

At Fei Yue Family Service Centre, community befrienders continue to telephone seniors whom they serve to check on their well-being.

"For those who are healthy and active, we encourage them to go out for a walk and do simple exercises, and to maintain personal hygiene and social distancing when doing so," said a spokesman.

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Wear suitable shoes and clothing. Start at a comfortable level, then gradually increase the level of difficulty.



Sit to stand: To strengthen the buttock and thigh muscles to help in getting up from a seated position.



Single leg stance: To improve balance and steadiness when walking or crossing kerbs and climbing stairs.



Heel raises: To strengthen calves to help in climbing stairs and walking. PHOTOS: TTSH DEPARTMENT OF PHYSIOTHERAPY

Keeping fit while at home

SAFETY FIRST

Consult a doctor if you are not used to exercising or have multiple medical conditions.

- Wear suitable shoes and clothing.
- Perform warm-ups before each exercise session and cool down after that.
- Drink enough water before, during and after exercise.
- Start at a comfortable level, then gradually increase the level

- of difficulty.
- Stop exercising if you feel severe pain in your chest, joints, neck, shoulders or arms; suffer dizziness, nausea, excessive sweating or muscle cramps.

SIMPLE EXERCISES

- Sit to stand**
 - Sit on a chair with arms across your chest.
 - Bring feet behind knees and lean

- forward over knees.
- Stand with torso upright and sit down on chair again. Repeat 10 times. Progress by decreasing height of the chair.
- Aim: Strengthen buttock and thigh muscles to help in getting up from a seated position, walking and climbing stairs.

- Heel raises**
 - Hold on to firm support to maintain balance.
 - Lift heels off the ground. Then

- lower heels. Repeat 10 times.
- Progress by reducing hand support or increasing duration of the hold.
- Aim: Strengthen calves to help in walking and climbing stairs.

- Single leg stance**
 - Hold on to firm support to maintain balance.
 - Stand on one leg and stand upright. Maintain balance for 10 seconds.
 - Repeat with other leg.

- Repeat whole routine 10 times.
- Progress by reducing hand support or increasing duration of the hold.
- Aim: Improve balance and steadiness when walking or crossing kerbs and climbing stairs.

OTHER TIPS

- Spend less time sitting. When watching TV, you can get up to walk around during commercial breaks.

- Start slow and build up. Try to walk for 10 minutes daily and increase the duration as you get more used to it.
- Make exercise or physical activity part of your daily routine. You can climb the stairs instead of taking the lift, or walk to the market instead of taking the bus.

SOURCE: DEPARTMENT OF PHYSIOTHERAPY, TAN TOCK SENHOSPITAL