



GOOD HEALTHCARE Polyclinics, such as this one in Kallang, make it easy for seniors of all means to access quality healthcare. ST FILE PHOTO



PARKS AND GARDENS A walk in a park or garden can bring about happiness and peace, in addition to the health benefits from staying fit. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY



FRIENDS Seniors can benefit from keeping in touch with friends. An antidote to loneliness is to have a circle of friends, both old and young. ST FILE PHOTO



KEEPING FIT Regular exercise is important for seniors and can contribute to their physical health and mental well-being. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

Old age has its own rewards. What's my secret? The secret is to be in good physical and mental health, to continue working, to have enough savings, to have a wide circle of friends, to exercise daily, to enjoy reading and the arts, to have a happy marriage and family, and to be relevant and useful to Singapore and the world.

The joys of growing old

Here are 10 reasons why old age in Singapore can be described as one's golden years.



Tommy Koh

Many readers will consider this a contrarian essay, bucking the tide of articles and commentaries about the sorrows of growing old. To be sure, old age brings many challenges to the physical and mental health of old people. It is also true that some old folks in Singapore live in poverty or loneliness, or both. However, it is not all negative. As a person in his 80s, I want to look on the bright side and talk about the joys of growing old. There are at least 10 reasons why old age can be described as one's golden years, especially in a place like Singapore.

1 SAFETY FIRST
Singapore is a safe city for old people. Law and order is good here. Unlike in some other places, it is safe for an old person in Singapore to go out at any time of the day. The danger is falling down rather than being "mugged" by criminals who prey on seniors because they are less able to defend themselves.

2 ACCESS TO GOOD HEALTHCARE
The second reason why life is so kind to the elderly in Singapore is its excellent healthcare facilities. A poor old person, like a rich old person, has access to good doctors and hospitals. The polyclinic is open to all Singaporeans. If an old person is impoverished, the usual charges will be waived. It is partly due to our excellent healthcare that Singaporeans enjoy one of the longest lifespans in the world.

3 PROXIMITY OF PARKS AND GARDENS
A walk in a park or garden brings happiness and peace to an old person, in addition to the health benefits that come from staying fit. My wife and I love our frequent walks in the Singapore Botanic Gardens at dawn, when it is cool and not crowded. Except for Gardens by the Bay, admission to the many parks and gardens dotted across our island is free. These include two new

therapeutic gardens that opened recently in Vishnu and Sembawang, with features that cater to a variety of users, including seniors and children with special needs.

4 FRIENDSHIPS
Meeting friends, old and young, is also on my list of the sources of happiness in old age. It is important to keep in touch with one's old friends. However, with the passage of time, some of them will pass away. It is therefore important for an old person to also have younger friends. The antidote to loneliness is to have a circle of friends. At the end of the day, having friends is better than having money but no friends.

5 CULTURE AND THE ARTS
Being able to enjoy culture and the arts with fewer constraints on one's time is another benefit of old age. Singapore has an excellent public library system, and old people should develop the good habit of reading books. Listening to music, whether live or recorded, is another source of joy to old people. We also have many good museums in Singapore. All of them, especially the National Museum, welcome old people to visit them. Group singing and dancing are also joyful and therapeutic. Art, in its myriad variety, is a form of therapy.

6 GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY
Old people who are still fit should consider becoming volunteers. There are so many good causes in Singapore which need volunteers. If unsure, one could contact the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre for advice. When you help others, you are also helping yourself. Consider the example of Mrs Barbara Bush, the wife of Mr George H.W. Bush, the 41st president of the United States. She once told me that during a

period of her life, she suffered from depression. But instead of seeing a therapist, she decided to become a volunteer. Unusual as it sounds, it worked for her: Her depression gradually disappeared as a result of her work as a volunteer.

7 WORKING IN OLD AGE
Unlike old people in some other countries, most seniors in Singapore want to work. While having a source of income is welcome, work is more important than that. It gives meaning and dignity to an old person's life. It makes an old person feel good that he is still making a contribution and has not become a liability.

Our founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew understood this. He once suggested that there should be no compulsory retirement age: "You work as long as you can work and you will be healthier and happier for it." On another occasion, he put it bluntly why retirement meant death: "With nothing to do, no purpose in life, you'll just degrade, go to seed."

I am very lucky to be able to work full-time at 85. Most of my friends were not so lucky. They had to retire even though they were still fit. It is a great shame that we are wasting so much human resource when we are short of manpower. I would also like to make an appeal. Please do not describe the ageing of Singapore as a "silver tsunami" or as an "existential threat". It demeans us. And, remember that those who are young today will one day be old.

8 KEEPING FIT
It is very important for old people to exercise regularly and not to become idle. My wife and I are in the habit of exercising every morning, either by swimming or walking. We enjoy our daily exercise. It has probably contributed to our physical health and mental



GRANDCHILDREN While the relationship between a father and a child can be contentious at times, the relationship between a grandparent and a grandchild can be loving and free of conflict. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAHAR



GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY Seniors who are still fit can consider becoming volunteers for activities such as this exercise-can-dance/singing session. There are many good causes in Singapore that need volunteers. ST FILE PHOTO



CULTURE AND ARTS Being able to enjoy culture and the arts with fewer constraints on one's time is a benefit of old age. Places such as the National Museum welcome seniors to visit them. PHOTO: NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE

well-being. I hope that our example will inspire other old people to develop the good habit of exercising regularly.

9 A HAPPY MARRIAGE
Your loving spouse is your lover, best friend, confidant, companion and caregiver. A happy marriage is good for one's physical and mental health. It is to be cherished. Married couples should try to grow old together.

10 GRANDCHILDREN
I am very fortunate to have three grandchildren: Toby, 12, Tara, eight, and Tommy, five. My wife and I and the other two grandparents have dinner with them every Friday evening. It is a joyous occasion. It gives me great pleasure to watch them grow up. It is not my job to discipline them. That is the job of their parents. My job is to give them my unconditional love and to help them grow into good people.

I must confess that I am enjoying my role as a grandfather much more than my role as a father. As a father, you are sometimes caught in a conflictual situation with your child. It is your duty to persuade your child not to break the law and the rules of good conduct. The relationship between a father and a child is usually loving and harmonious but occasionally unpleasant and contentious. In contrast, the relationship between a grandfather and a grandchild is loving and free of conflict. Growing old is often described as a very negative experience, dominated by illness, lack of mobility, absent-mindedness, boredom and loneliness. What I want to point out in this essay is that there is a more positive view.

I am actually enjoying the process of growing old. Old age has its own rewards. What's my secret? The secret is to be in good physical and mental health, to continue working, to have enough savings, to have a wide circle of friends, to exercise daily, to enjoy reading and the arts, to have a happy marriage and family, and to be relevant and useful to Singapore and the world.

• Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh has been happily married for 56 years and has two children, three grandchildren and many friends.