



Married couple Richard Foo, 68, and Cecilia Tan, 64, doing gardening at Lions Befrienders Active Ageing Centre near their home in Ghim Moh. Mr Foo, a former chef, likes to unwind at home or grab coffee with former colleagues while Madam Tan has travelled with groups of friends every other month after retiring from nursing four years ago. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

## Social network key to happiness of seniors with no kids: Study

Four-fifths of them cite similar well-being to those with kids because of family or friends

Shermaine Ang

Madam Eunice Gan, who is 75 and lives alone, fears the day she will not be able to walk, or loses her cognitive abilities.

Loneliness hits when she is ill. "You feel that you're old, your body's breaking down. Why am I getting sick so often? It can be rather depressing."

But her close relationship with her niece and grandnephew, who live across the road from her flat in Jurong East, helps keep her feet at bay.

"My nieces are like my daughters. And with my grandnephew, it's a very special relationship, which I think is a blessing," said Madam Gan, who is among a group of seniors without children, an increasingly common situation for many older couples and singles in Singapore.

Nearly 15 per cent of Singaporeans in their 60s, and one in five Singaporeans in their 50s, do not have children, according to research on ageing in recent years.

For these adults, a recent local study has highlighted the importance of strong social networks in supporting their happiness and life satisfaction as they grow older without children to depend on.

The paper, published in April in *The Journals Of Gerontology*, found that four-fifths of childless individuals aged 50 and above in Singapore rated their well-being on comparable levels to those with children because they had support from family, friends or both.

The rest – one-fifth of the group, who had poorer well-being than their peers with children – had limited support from family and friends, according to the study led by NUS associate professor of sociology Bussarawan Teerawichitchainan.

Adults who were older, foreign-born, had poor health or lower socio-economic status, or lacked religious affiliation tended to have limited support networks. Those with multiple siblings and who were more highly educated typically had a wider support network.

The study was based on a nationwide survey of 1,500 Singaporeans aged 50 and above, including 500 childless individuals, conducted in 2022. It did not distinguish between childless individuals who were single and those who were married, though nearly 80 per cent of the childless group were unmarried.

Among the questions asked were whether respondents lived with their parents, siblings, extended family or friends; if they give or receive financial support from them; and whether they feel emotionally

close to them. It also looked at whether respondents were involved in weekly community and religious activities.

Parent and sibling ties were the most important to childless seniors in their 50s and above, the study found, with 35 per cent of respondents likely to live with their parents and give or receive support from them, and siblings or extended kin supporting the 32 per cent of respondents whose parents were absent. Strong ties with friends and neighbours were less common for the group of seniors without children.

Prof Teerawichitchainan said this is in line with the prevailing norm of filial obligations, where family ties take precedence over friendships.

But the study noted that upcoming cohorts of childless Singaporeans are likely to age with only one or no sibling at all due to the low fertility rate. "In the face of frail health, future childless individuals are likely to depend increasingly on extended kin, non-kin, and the state."

Madam Gan, who has lived alone for more than two decades after her divorce, has a weekly routine of dinner and church with her niece's family on weekends, sessions with her bible study group on Tuesdays and singing group on Thursdays.

She provides moral support to her older brother, who also lives alone and went through depression. More recently, Madam Gan has been busy writing a self-help book on emotional resilience for seniors. She decided to take a step back from work in 2023, after running her own emotional coaching practice for the last 10 years.

Come October, she is looking forward to moving to a new assisted-living Housing Board flat for seniors in Bukit Batok. The wheelchair-accessible flat will have emergency buttons and 24-hour staff to attend to seniors in case of emergencies, and offer services such as housekeeping and meal delivery which seniors can purchase. "I'm excited... It's a new beginning," she said, adding that she wants to prepare for the future when she might not be as healthy and mobile.

Madam Cecilia Tan, 64, and her husband Richard Foo, 68, who do not have children, have enjoyed the last few years after retirement.

After retiring from nursing four years ago, Madam Tan has travelled with groups of friends, like her primary and secondary schoolmates or her nursing batch, every other month. She also visits her siblings working in Bangkok, Shanghai and Ho Chi Minh City.

Mr Foo, a former chef, prefers to unwind at home or grab coffee with former colleagues. The couple



Madam Koh Sew Lan (far left), 78, with Madam Teo Ah Heeh, 72, playing a game of Rummikub at Care Corner Active Ageing Centre in Woodlands. The centre is where Madam Koh goes to for exercise, crafts, karaoke and food. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG



Madam Eunice Gan, 75, working at home on her self-help book on emotional resilience for seniors. Madam Gan, who has lived alone since her divorce over 20 years ago, has a weekly routine of dinner and church with her niece's family on weekends. ST PHOTO: BRIAN TEO

also volunteer with their church and do a traditional Chinese meridian exercise routine, crafts and floor mural painting at the Lions Befrienders Active Ageing Centre (AAC) near their home in Ghim Moh.

Madam Tan, who was recently a caregiver to her best friend who was recovering from surgery, hopes her close friends can help her when she needs care in the future.

Not everyone is as lucky. After Mr Lim Kee San, 63, had the toes on his left foot amputated due to diabetes, he has stayed home most of the time except to go for dialysis three times a week.

His parents have died and he has a strained relationship with his siblings, except for his older sister living in Sabah whom he talks to on the phone occasionally. "I'm used to being alone," he said in Mandarin. Mr Lim, who never married, worked as a taxi driver for nearly three decades till the Covid-19 pandemic. Since then, he has not been working.

He now most frequently meets a duck rice hawkker he met at a coffee shop near his flat in 2009, who became his friend. The hawkker delivered meals to Mr Lim's door nearly every day during the pandemic.

"He's like a brother to me," he said. Professor Paulin Straughan, director of SMU's Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (Rosa), said that with an increasing number of seniors with no siblings, focus should turn to support between neighbours.

She said assisted-living flats being built will make it easier for neighbours to interact, much like old HDB flats with common corridors. Several assisted-living housing projects are in the works in areas like Bukit Batok and Queenstown, aimed at helping seniors live on their own and providing some care services and communal activities.

The AACs can serve as a node for seniors to come together in each estate, and community clubs could also have regular activities for seniors, she said. Rather than just attending programmes, seniors should be given a platform to start their own initiatives, she added, citing a badminton interest group started by a retiree in her Rosa focus group.

"That's what I think will help us – if we can grow our appreciation of what family is, and think of neighbours as extended family."

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