

IPS Exchange Series: Towards Ageing Well – Aspirations, Challenges and Initiatives

By Chang Zhi Yang
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Last year, for the first time, the proportion of Singapore residents aged 65 and above crossed the 10 per cent mark. This trend will continue, and Singapore will have to confront the complex challenges brought about by an ageing population.

Growing old is part and parcel of life and it does not have to be a negative experience. As the late Dutch priest and writer Henri Nouwen wrote: “Ageing is not a reason for despair, but a basis for hope, not a slow decaying but a gradual maturing, not a fate to be undergone but a chance to be embraced.” This idea of ageing as a positive process features strongly in *Towards Ageing Well: Aspirations, Challenges and Initiatives*, the second and most recent report published as part of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Exchange Series.

Lifelong learning, optimism in employability and the concept of successful ageing are the three main areas of discussion in the report written by Dr Mathew Mathews, an IPS Senior Research Fellow and Terence Leong Yong Hwa, Senior Manager at the Centre for Ageing Studies in Temasek Polytechnic.

The insights and recommendations in the report reflect the research conducted by the authors, and the views of Singaporeans from all walks of life. Their thoughts were captured through 11 focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and a household survey with respondents aged 50 to 70.

Towards Ageing Well aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation on what it means to grow old well in a small country like Singapore, keeping in mind the aspirations of the population and economic realities we face here.

Asked for their personal thoughts on the report and ageing well, Dr Mathews and Mr Leong gave the following responses.

Q: The report discusses three aspects of ageing well. Why did you choose to focus on these three issues?

Mathew and Terence: The commissioning agency, Council for Third Age is focused on three things — promoting lifelong learning, optimism on senior employability and social gerontology. We decided to focus on the areas that they were concerned about since these

three areas are crucial considerations for ageing well. For quite a while, people have been focused on the biological aspect of ageing. They think about the loss of optimum bodily functions and thus focus on healthcare. But there is so much about ageing that we should think about such as the opportunities it creates for us to learn, enjoy and be productive.

We need to see older people in a holistic manner. The older adult population cannot be just reduced to a “biological mass” that needs treating and caring for. They have needs and aspirations, and should be valued like the rest of society. This starts when we begin to expand our perspective of this segment of our population. As such, these areas are a good starting point.

Q: You’ve emphasised in the report that employability of older workers can help promote the concept of ageing well. How would you encourage different sectors of society to do this, especially if an ageist mentality prevails in some parts?

Mathew and Terence: We’ll focus on employers, as we think the older adults and their families are cognisant of the value of staying engaged through employment.

One approach is to keep highlighting the positive traits of the older worker. Another key approach is to emphasise the cost effectiveness of keeping or hiring older workers. For example, training new workers costs the company money because it takes new employees some time to get up to speed.

Older workers tend to stay on a job longer. Having older workers can actually lead to lower costs in this area if there are fewer turnovers because of this. Ageist mentalities can and should be confronted.

Q: The thought of lifelong learning can be quite dreary to most people. Personally, how do you intend to be a lifelong learner?

Terence: I’ve always wanted to take up photography and learn a few different musical instruments. I’ve also always enjoyed history, so I’ll find ways to do more of that.

Mathew: At this point, lifelong learning is still about picking up skills for me to do better at work — better techniques in writing and analysis — essentially work-related. I hope when I have a little more time I can start mastering a musical instrument. My father-in-law is trying to master classical guitar and he picked it up in his late sixties so there is still some time.

Q: You are both fathers. In the report, survey respondents indicate that adult children and grandchildren feature significantly in the process of ageing well. What kind of relationship do you hope to have with your children as you become a senior?

Terence: I would hope that they want to spend time with me, to learn from and with me. I think doing things together, e.g., volunteering, will be great.

Mathew: Of course I would like to have a close relationship with them. I have three boys and people say that nowadays boys won’t be as connected with their parents compared to girls when they grow up. Well, I hope that will not be the case and that they will invite me into their lives. I envision living in close proximity with at least one of them and being together as

a family when we are off for vacations. Well, my wife and I will first have to make sure they marry the right wives!

Q: In three words, please tell us what kind of senior you hope to be?

Terence: Engaged, happy, relevant.

Mathew: Wise, spiritual, optimistic.

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The [IPS Exchange Series](#) is published by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). It comprises final reports on primary research conducted by IPS researchers and the Institute's associates, as well as reports of study groups, conferences and seminars organised by the Institute. The objective of this publication series is to disseminate research findings as well as deliberations and policy suggestions that arise from the Institute's programmes.

The full report of *Towards Ageing Well: Aspirations, Challenges and Initiatives* is available [here](#).

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