

Most elderly Singaporeans have 'positive outlook' on ageing

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Most elderly Singaporeans have a positive outlook about the prospect of growing old in Singapore, according to a report released on Wednesday (Oct 15) by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

The majority of respondents – about 80 per cent – said they felt confident their needs will be taken care of as they age. About 70 per cent said they look forward to each new day and feel there is meaning in their life, while 60 per cent said they look back on their lives with a sense of happiness.

Still, there are concerns. Only 37 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that "in general, most elderly Singaporeans have little to worry about", and 46 per cent rated their financial adequacy as average or poor.

According to the report, quality of life starts dropping from the age of 65 – far earlier than a study done in the United Kingdom, where quality of life starts declining from the age of 75.

Researchers said that could be because in Singapore, life often revolves around work. Retirement could thus lead to a sense of loss, and this could be an issue as the population ages and shrinks, and the elderly can no longer rely on the extended family for support.

This is where community connections come in, said IPS Senior Research Fellow Mathew Mathews. "The aspirations of the elderly include being socially connected. They realise it would give them some kind of meaning. But of course, if we think about the current social connectedness, a lot of it revolves around the family. There is considerably less social connectedness with the community, and I think that is a very important aspect of people being able to age well, age in place and their ability to feel there is a community around them, not just the family," he said.

For the elderly who do not have children, "that will also impinge on their level of family connectedness", he pointed out. "Having people build strong connections with their community, with friends would be important, and those kinds of meaningful connections can't wait until retirement. It will have to start earlier.

"People have to take to the idea of having some kind of work-life balance, because if all their life revolves around work and the rest of the little time that they have is back with family, there is little time to cultivate leisure or learning or some kind of involvement in the community. When that happens in the later years, it will be very difficult for them to restart and build that kind of connection."

The majority of respondents said their social networks and activities revolved around family, with nearly 90 per cent saying they have get-togethers with their family at least once a month.

Less than 10 per cent engaged in social activities through attending a course, participating in grassroots or community activities or using a senior activity centre, within a month.

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS

The report's researchers said that with changing demographics, the elderly of the future will be better educated and financially more prepared for retirement.

The challenge is to actively engage older Singaporeans in the community, they said, recommending that there be more options for the elderly to volunteer their time and expertise as well as more community-based activities.

With the growing number of singles and childless couples, the researchers also said the traditional expectation that the needs of the elderly can be taken care of by their families has to be debunked. Instead, there needs to be sufficient infrastructure for ageing in place and community social support for those who grow old in the absence of extended family support.

The study, commissioned by the Council for Third Age, which promotes active ageing here, covered more than 2,000 people between the ages of 50 and 74 years. The report is jointly authored by IPS Senior Research Fellow Mathew Mathews and NUS sociology professor Paulin Tay Straughan.

Responding to queries from Channel NewsAsia, Council for Third Age CEO Soh Swee Ping said creating an age-friendly environment and society for seniors takes more than the right infrastructure. "Many parties need to play their part, from Government agencies, social organisations, grassroots, community and commercial organisations. Not forgetting the individual's effort as well, all these need to work in tandem for our society to become a place for successful ageing."

She added: "We are glad that most seniors viewed ageing positively, and felt confident that their needs would be taken care of as they age, though they still have apprehension concerning the general seniors' population. In the past, ageing has always been addressed in a negative light, and inadvertently instills fear and the feeling of being a burden. However, the conversation on ageing has begun moving towards a more positive one, associating it with opportunities and societal contribution. We can expect that the new cohort of seniors will embrace ageing quite differently. They will be more knowledgeable on how to equip themselves to age successfully."