

Old storytellers on tap

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Family members, the community and the authorities all have a part to play in alleviating the plight of elderly Singaporeans who are lonely and depressed. For many, all they have are wistful memories of a bygone Singapore, as familiar sights and cultural icons disappear, like Rediffusion. Such feelings can be acute and should not be ignored, given the growing pool of seniors here. About one in five of the 412 elderly people surveyed for a new study by the National University Health System showed signs of depression. They were all aged 75 and above. What is significant is that the majority of them live with their families. Previous studies have shown that those who live alone tend to be more depressed than those who do not. There are now 73,000 people aged 80 and above in Singapore.

This is likely to rise to 108,000 by 2020 and to nearly 180,000 by 2030, according to projections by the Institute of Policy Studies.

One contributing factor is that many families these days do not all sit together for lunch or dinner, as household members have different work or study routines. The elderly, retired member in a family often ends up eating alone. As his children and grandchildren go about doing their own things, he inevitably fades into the background. What is being ignored is a veritable storehouse of valuable memories - a personalised Rediffusion storyteller, if you will - to help connect the young to their family and community roots. All it takes is a little time to engage elders in conversation or to share a meal with them. More volunteers who offer befriender services to the elderly will be a great help too. The senior citizens' corners in the void decks should be a melting pot for all. There should also be more spaces in Singapore's popular culture for content that seniors can appreciate. Produced well, these TV and radio programmes, and print and online features can open an evocative window for all to Singapore's fast-vanishing past.