

Why Friends Matter

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AMID shrinking family sizes, they can provide an alternative system of support, especially for those who are divorced and those with low income.

Close family ties are a mainstay of Singaporean life. The 2013 Survey on Social Attitudes of Singaporeans (SAS), released in a research paper by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) earlier this year, found that 83 per cent of the respondents would turn to their families when faced with financial difficulties and other troubles.

Support was also readily available for many Singaporeans from their kin network, with 72 per cent stating that they could speak to at least one relative outside their immediate family about private matters, and 78 per cent reporting that they could call one of their relatives for help. Such close-knit family structures are due both to the cultural emphasis on family cohesion, and social policies which encourage the creation of families and family bonding.

However, a comparison of the 2013 results with earlier surveys done several times from 2001 found that there has been some decline in family support. This can be attributed to several factors: the increasing trend of smaller family sizes; the decreasing influence of religious and cultural communities which emphasise the traditional family structure and family bonds; and growing modernity, which places more emphasis on self-fulfilment than on traditional family structures.

Numerous research studies show the imperative of investing in forging strong family support structures. The emotional ties that families provide lead to better health and longevity. But since the trends affecting these necessary social support structures cannot be reversed, what are the alternatives?

If international trends are indicative, an article last month in the *Journal of Gerontology* showed that among more recent cohorts of Danes, there has been an increase in friendship-centred networks.

However, it may be challenging to rely on friends for more intensive kinds of support such as personal care when one is diseased or ageing. Also, there is the issue of reciprocity, which is expected since support is based on goodwill and not kinship. Nonetheless, the usefulness of such friendship ties cannot be discounted. While the Danish study showed that a family-based network system provided the greatest support, a diverse network structure which included both family and friendship ties was also effective.

In an Institute of Policy Studies working paper which National University of Singapore (NUS) Associate Professor Paulin Straughan and I published in 2014, we suggested that it is important to facilitate ways for Singaporeans to build stronger friendship ties. This was based on our findings from the Perception and Attitudes towards Ageing and Seniors Survey, where most among those aged between 50 and 75 were engaged primarily in family-based social networks. Their levels of community and other social involvement were low, even though 68 per cent expressed in the survey that they wanted to find new friendships.

The MSF report also highlighted groups that have lower levels of social support. Two groups were notable - those who were divorced, separated and widowed (grouped together since there were fewer of such cases to make meaningful analysis) and those who had lower household income. The 2013 SAS found that among those in the first category, 79 per cent compared with 86 per cent of married respondents reported that they could talk to a family member if they were in trouble.

Similarly, only 68 per cent had at least one relative they could call on for help, compared with 81 per cent who were married. When it came to friends, there were only 56 per cent who had close friends they could tell their personal problems to, compared with 77 per cent of married persons and 94 per cent of singles.

The lower levels of social support across family, relatives and friendships were also discernible among those with lower household incomes. The 2013 SAS found that 78 per cent of respondents with household incomes of less than \$2,000 a month had a family member they could talk to when they were in trouble, compared with 83 per cent among those who had household incomes of \$8,000 and above.

But the differences were more stark when considering friendship ties - only 69 per cent with less than \$2,000 household income reported having close friends they could tell their personal problems to, compared with 90 per cent in the \$8,000 and higher income bracket. There were also 30 per cent of those in the low-income range who reported that they had no friends they could talk to about personal matters compared with 6 per cent of high income earners.

Losing a spouse sometimes separates one from family and friendship networks built and maintained through the couple's relationship. This is even more so for those who have settled in Singapore as a result of a marriage and have most of their family ties in another country. Furthermore, there is considerable trauma that comes from the dissolution of marriages.

In contemporary times, it takes more than love to keep family and friendship ties together. Middle- and high-income households have the resources to foster "fun time" with those in their network through overseas vacations or dining together - something which those with low income, with their erratic work schedules and financial constraints, find difficult.

According to some researchers, poor social support networks that result in social isolation are as consequential to individual well-being as the burden of diabetes, for example. Unfortunately, social isolation is not addressed as aggressively as lifestyle diseases.

This is something a number of local community agencies are attempting to address in providing services, whether to those going through divorce to help them better cope with their new lives, or offering meaningful social activities to those who can benefit from them.

Building ties, whether with family or friends, does require individual effort and initiative, but it certainly can be fostered by community resources which make this more possible.

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