

There's every reason to embrace ageing with positivity

We can't reverse the course of time, but we can nurture healthy relationships and strong social connections to bring joy to our silver years.

Gerard Ee

I am just shy of my 75th birthday. Like many of my contemporaries, my knees are not what they used to be, and my body is still recovering from an earlier battle with cancer.

But to everyone who asks, "How are you?", I reply, in all truthfulness: "I am very well." Seniors are often depicted as weak and frail. Out of good intentions, society has put up guardrails around what we, as seniors, should and should not do. This has evolved into an invisible "silver ceiling" that is preventing some of us from living life to the fullest.

True, despite the progress that mankind has made, we cannot reverse ageing or undo the ills that come with it. What we seniors can do is to stay healthy and be positive and grateful for life.

So I look at wellness this way: It is not the absence of illness. As we age, our bodies deteriorate; that is the natural cycle of life. Rather, wellness is a state of mind. It comes from a place of happiness and contentment.

We have all seen it happen in one way or another. How an elderly grandmother with chronic pain, for example, lights up whenever her grandchildren visit. In this and many other instances, joy is the best painkiller.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Joy is directly connected to the health of our relationships.

There is a significant body of research that suggests social connections make people happier and keep frailty at bay. Human beings are social creatures. We find joy in positive interpersonal relationships. By the same token, dysfunctional or non-existent



Participants in a mass walk in the Punggol area as part of the Agency for Integrated Care's Break the Silver Ceiling campaign earlier in 2024. The campaign was started to challenge perceptions about ageing and shine the light on seniors who defy age stereotypes. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

relationships can cause anxiety, depression and loneliness.

To be well and stay well, particularly in our silver years, we need strong and healthy social connections.

But social circles tend to shrink as we get older.

When I attended a former classmate's wake a few years ago, it felt like a sombre class reunion. There were so many familiar faces that I had not seen in years. I wondered out loud why we seemed to meet only for funerals. The truth is, we all knew why. We were busy with life.

After finishing school, we were focused on getting ahead in our careers and raising our families to the best of our abilities. It was easy to let friends fall by the wayside.

Often, we also do not realise that there are many social connections embedded in working life via colleagues, customers and more. These vanish the moment we retire, leaving us with more time but fewer people to spend it with – and fewer sources of joy.

As seniors, it is important for us to make new friends and

reconnect with long-lost ones to safeguard our social network and protect our own well-being.

Today, I have several groups of friends whom I make a point to meet regularly. I catch up with my mates from Officer Cadet School frequently. Arising from the funeral I mentioned, we have started a gathering for the Class of '65.

In addition, because I currently hold several active appointments, I still benefit from the social connections that come with working life.

THE PHYSICAL ASPECT OF STAYING SOCIAL

One prerequisite of an active social life is a healthy body. In my work with the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC), I have heard of seniors who do not leave their homes because they are afraid of falling and hurting themselves.

This pains me because it is often fear, not physical ability, that holds them back.

In 2007, I was diagnosed with Stage 3 colon cancer. I am fortunate to be in remission now.

While I am not the type to hold regrets, I must admit that I ignored the initial symptoms.

Health screening and early detection may have made a difference.

My healing journey, from diagnosis to surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy, was physically taxing and emotionally draining. But I am a firm believer of mind over matter. I refused to let cancer get me down.

I banned my concerned family from treating me like an invalid. I focused on getting better and living life as normally as I could. Under my doctor's close supervision, I was able to resume daily life as I defined it.

I even went back to the gym. I adapted my routine, learnt to listen to my body and went at my own pace. If I ever felt self-conscious, it lasted only a fleeting second because I quickly realised that no one was paying any attention to me. Even if they were, it was only to give me a smile and an encouraging nod.

An old man trying his best in the gym gets plenty of support, it seems.

THE POWER OF STANDING TALL

In the wellness equation, our minds and bodies are so intrinsically connected that there truly is power in positive thinking.

When we are filled with dread, it shows in our posture. We are hunched over, folded into ourselves. Conversely, when we stand up tall, hold our chest up and pull our shoulders back, we naturally feel more confident.

On this mind and body link, retirees do need to be more proactive. It begins with shattering that "silver ceiling" in our minds and not letting age define us. This is why AIC started the Break the Silver Ceiling campaign to challenge perceptions about ageing and shine the light on seniors who defy age stereotypes.

What we should do is to make the best out of every single day. Every time I open my eyes in the morning, I am grateful to have another day to live. I promise to spend it well. I hope you will too.

• Dr Gerard Ee is chairman of the Agency for Integrated Care.