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Headline: Older adults resilient in the face of Covid-19 but social support needed: SMU report

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Older adults have adapted to the challenges of the pandemic in novel ways, such as by starting online businesses to generate new sources of income or developing new exercise routines as working from home became the norm.

But social support that extends beyond what is offered by family members, involving friends and neighbours, remains key to their well-being.

These were among the key findings in a report released on Thursday (Sept 2) by Singapore Management University's Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (Rosa).

The report compiled research that Rosa had conducted in the past year on the well-being of older adults, and included new findings from seven focus groups with 35 participants aged 56 to 75.

The aim of the focus groups was to learn more about how older adults coped during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as provide context for trends that were identified in previous research.

For example, previous research had found that while the coronavirus outbreak disrupted the provision of chronic care to older adults suffering from chronic ailments, respondents' satisfaction with health remained constant.

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The focus groups suggested that the increase in work-life balance due to working from home had enabled some older adults to adopt healthier lifestyles and exercise routines, leading to improved health.

For example, one participant said that being able to finish work promptly from home and not having to commute enabled him to stick to a daily exercise routine that lowered his diabetic index.

"While we may often think of the pandemic as a purely negative occurrence, it is also important for us to recognise that there are also lessons that can be learnt from it that may help shape society in ways that enable successful ageing," said the researchers in the report.

The report also stated that many older adults were resilient and innovative in overcoming challenges from the pandemic such as income loss by taking online courses to pick up new skills or starting online businesses.

It suggested that income support programmes be made available to those who experienced a loss of income so as to improve economic well-being among older adults.

Another key finding was that social support is important for that same age group.

Respondents cited ways that others had helped them amid Covid-19 - teaching them how to use communication platforms like Zoom, helping out with grocery shopping amid the circuit breaker, or setting up group buy schemes to save on delivery costs.

Professor Paulin Straughan, director of Rosa, said that as Singapore moves into the endemic phase of Covid-19, it is important to take stock of what has been learnt so far to help older adults transition into the new phase.

She added: "It is also important to recognise the many ways that older adults have demonstrated resilience in the face of the pandemic.

"Only in doing so can we adopt the right strategies to proactively enable older adults to not just adapt, but flourish as we move forward."

Going forward, the centre aims to better understand the "ageing Singaporean" and spotlight ideas to support and improve their well-being.

It is recruiting a younger sample of about 2,000 participants, aged 50 to 55, for the Singapore Life Panel study, and will include new topics in its scope.

The Singapore Life Panel is a monthly panel survey of older Singaporeans, aged 55 to 74, as well as their spouses, on whom much of Rosa's research is based.

Key findings and recommendations

1. Older adults have discovered novel ways for coping with the pandemic

- Many older adults showed resilience by picking up new skills or starting online businesses when faced with challenges such as income loss.

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- Recommendation: Roll out income support programmes

2. The pandemic so far has not been all bad for older adults in Singapore

- While chronic care for older adults was disrupted by the pandemic, health satisfaction remained constant. This was likely due to the shift to working from home that led to older adults adopting healthier lifestyles and exercise routines.

- Recommendation: Learn from the pandemic about how to improve older adults' well-being even after the pandemic ends.

3. Social support is important, including from networks of neighbours

- Friends, co-workers and family have helped in various ways, such as teaching older adults how to use Zoom or do grocery shopping during the circuit breaker.

- Recommendation: Ensure older adults remain socially connected and have adequate levels of social support.