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Reach out to lessen seniors' loneliness

ONE of the key challenges in ensuring seniors' well-being is in increasing their social engagement ("New research institute to tackle ageing issues", last Tuesday).

Local research has identified elderly people in social isolation - seniors who are unmarried, widowed or living alone - as a growing issue that needs to be addressed.

Befrienders' programmes, such as those by the Organisation of Senior Volunteers, or RSVP, where seniors befriend other isolated seniors, have shown some promise in addressing this issue.

However, living alone is a separate problem from loneliness. There are seniors who may not appear socially isolated but are nevertheless lonely.

Researchers are developing measures of loneliness and a growing body of research is showing the link between loneliness and poor health - such as mental decline, depression and other chronic diseases - to a similar extent as more well-known risk factors, such as obesity.

Groups working to support lonely seniors through befriending, social engagement and other support services cannot solve the problem on their own. Much of the seniors' loneliness is made evident when they retire from work and have no other duties, such as raising children.

More needs to be done to encourage people to reach out to others to lessen social isolation.

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