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Seniors can get help from health coaches under Lions Befrienders-NTU partnership



The partnership also enables Lions Befrienders to tap NTU's technology to design apps. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

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Elderly heartlanders will get more help in looking after their health thanks to a new partnership between Lions Befrienders and Nanyang Technological University's Ageing Research Institute for Society and Education (Arise).

Under a memorandum of understanding (MOU), a pool of health coaches will be trained to help senior citizens manage chronic ailments, evaluate their health information and advise them in exercise, diet and other well-being goals.

For instance, an elderly woman was known to loiter around a fruit stall every night, waiting for it to close so she could get boxes of durians at a discounted rate.

On learning of her routine, Mr Calvin Chew, centre manager of the Lions Befrienders Active Ageing Centre in Ang Mo Kio, stepped in to advise her to cut down on durians as eating too much of the fruit is unhealthy.

The social service agency is adopting health coaching - guiding people to take charge of their health - as a new approach to better cater to Singapore's growing elderly population.

To date, NTU has trained 79 Lions Befrienders staff under its Health Coaching for Older Adults course developed by Arise. All staff and volunteers from all 10 of Lions Befrienders' Active Ageing Centres will take part in the training.

At the signing ceremony at the Ang Mo Kio centre on Friday (April 8), Professor Tim White, Arise's covering chair, said: "We don't just do research in the laboratories or in the office. We take it out to the community, execute it, and create impact. This partnership with Lions Befrienders is a very tangible outcome of trying to achieve these (goals)."

Besides training staff and volunteers, the 21/2-year MOU also enables Lions Befrienders to tap NTU's technology to design apps to monitor seniors' diet, games to train their cognitive skills and exercises to build physical strength .

One game that has been developed is a virtual race in Chinatown. Standing in front of a computer screen displaying an animation of Chinatown, the player has to perform upper-body exercises to collect virtual coins. The game has a multiplayer mode, so seniors can engage in friendly competitions.

The Ang Mo Kio centre is considering giving out of healthier food rations as a reward to seniors who have successfully completed such games.

Madam Wee Chye Luan, 87, who was at the Active Ageing Centre in Ang Mo Kio on Friday, said: "I am very happy here. The staff members take really good care of us and I have many friends I can talk to."

The 87-year-old widow lives alone and religiously visits the centre every weekday.



Arise intern Li Zeyu (left) showing Madam Grace Tang, 74, how to use the Virtual Exercise Therapist System, a personalised interactive gaming system. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

At the centre, the seniors begin the morning with some physical exercises before heading home for lunch. Sometimes, lunch is provided.

Some of them, including Madam Wee, will return in the afternoon to take part in other activities planned by the centre, such as handicraft.

Madam Wee said she was passing by the centre on her way home one day and decided to give its activities a try. Other seniors were approached by Lions Befrienders volunteers who had knocked on their doors.

Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Ng Ling Ling, who was guest of honour at Friday's event, said: "In Singapore, there is no need to fear even if you are living alone...We all know it takes a village to raise a child. And in an ageing country like Singapore, it takes a whole society to care for every single senior."