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Living Well: The silver lining in ageing



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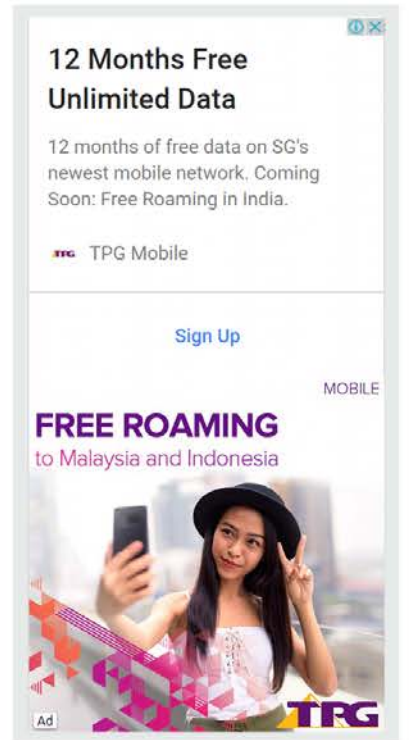


Research shows that longer lives lead to greater wealth and people become more intelligent as they get older

The United Nations' International Day of Older Persons is celebrated annually on Oct 1 to recognise the contributions of older people and examine issues that affect their lives. We should start doing this in Singapore too and all those over 65 could be given a day off on that date.

Singapore topped the world in life expectancy in 2017 with an expected lifespan at birth of 84.8 years, surging ahead of traditional chart-topper Japan. If one survives to 65, then the expected lifespan is even longer.

In Singapore, one in two Singaporeans aged 65 today is expected to live beyond 85 and one in three will live beyond 90. Today there are 100,000 people over the age of 80 and this will become 200,000 by 2030. This is the fastest-growing segment of our population.



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The year 2018 was also a historic year for Singapore when the number of people aged over 65 became equal to the number of people under 15.

Our future is definitely grey, but it has lot of silver in that grey. The gift of a longer life is ultimately the gift of time.

Let me enumerate some good reasons why longevity and population ageing have to be celebrated.

1 LONGEVITY AND HEALTH CREATE WEALTH

Research shows that longer and healthier lives and lower fertility generally lead to greater wealth.



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People accumulate wealth during their working years and by the time they reach old age, their wealth is near their peak.

Therefore, as people realise that they are going to live longer lives, they are motivated to save more for their retirement. This increase in savings and assets contributes to capital accumulation and economic growth.

Sadly, there is no attribution or credit given to the older population for this increase in economic capital. Instead, older people are often blamed for the steep increases in healthcare expenditure.

It would be incorrect to attribute all, or even most, of the increase in healthcare spending to increased longevity.

Medical expenditure is determined to a large extent by increasing incomes and new technology. Richer societies understandably choose to spend some part of the additional resources available to them on purchasing better health in the same way as they also choose better

houses and cars.

Therefore, increasing healthcare expenditure is due to us becoming richer and more advanced technologically and not just because of longevity.

2 DEVELOPMENT OF THE SILVER ECONOMY

The silver economy or the longevity economy is the market segment broadly defined as consisting of older people over the age of 50 who are consumers of products and services that suit their needs and wants.

Singapore was ranked No. 1 out of 15 Asia-Pacific economies in 2015 by the Silver Economy Index, which measures silver industry market potential.

The silver economy will see growth in private healthcare, travel, pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, insurance, housing and retail industries, so longevity has a positive economic influence on societies.

3 PEOPLE GET SMARTER AND MORE CREATIVE AS THEY GET OLDER

Cognitive studies show that intelligence does not inevitably decline in older persons. Brain cells can live for 100 years or more. In some brain regions, new neurons form in old brains.

The Cattell-Horn-Carroll theory is widely regarded as the most influential theory in the study of human intelligence.

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According to this theory, there are basically two types of intelligence - fluid and crystallised. Fluid intelligence enables us to learn and process new information quickly. Crystallised intelligence refers to the usage of accumulated knowledge and experience in decision-making and other mental activities.

Both types of intelligence are important in everyday life and complement each other.

Many studies have demonstrated that fluid intelligence peaks in early adulthood and then declines, gradually at first and then more rapidly after 70 or so.

Crystallised intelligence, however, continues to improve as individuals age. The ageing brain scores better on tests of crystallised intelligence compared with young brains.

It may surprise many people to find out that there are many similarities between the ageing brain and the creative brain. Both use crystallised knowledge to make innovative associations.

Also, studies from the United States show that older people make good entrepreneurs. Older people in Singapore could be encouraged to go into this field.

4 PEOPLE BECOME HAPPIER AND MORE CONTENTED IN OLD AGE

We are happy in childhood, but from the age of about 18, we start to become less happy gradually and this reaches its lowest point in the 40s and early 50s.

However, the happiness curve is U-shaped and as we head into our mid-50s, the levels of this emotion take off again and then when we are in our 60s and beyond, we are most happy and contented.

Of course, in the last couple of years of life, the curve begins to dip again.

Happiness doesn't just make us happy - it also makes us healthier and more productive.

Research also shows that anger declines throughout life; sadness rises slightly in middle age and falls thereafter. It has been shown that older people have fewer rows and come up with better solutions to conflict. They are better at controlling their emotions, better at accepting misfortune and less prone to anger. The greyer the world gets, the brighter it becomes.

5 TIME OF 'UNMATCHED SEXUAL EXPRESSION'

According to noted author and physician Christiane Northrup: "Fifty marks the beginning of the best years of our lives, including the best sex of our lives."

She observes that mid-life can be a time of unmatched sexual expression and emotional fulfilment.

With this plethora of advantages and attributes of longevity, we have to redesign our life trajectory so that it improves the well-being and opportunities of people at all ages.

With our extra healthy decades of life, we can design a multi-phased and customised life course.

On this personalised life trajectory, older people will be joined with millennials and we will ring in our new way of life together.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Straits Times on September 30, 2019, with the headline 'The silver lining in ageing'. [Print Edition](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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