



Mr Teng Hock Bee goes to the Meeting Centre at Onesimus Village in Kebun Baru a few times a week. There, he socialises with others and engages in activities to stimulate him cognitively. The Meeting Centres programme also runs support group sessions for caregivers. ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI

An oasis for seniors with less severe dementia, and their caregivers

Free support programme tailors activities to needs, interests and abilities of participants

Joyce Teo
Senior Health Correspondent

In March 2021, Ms Jacqueline Teng noticed something was amiss with her father, not long after he had undergone hernia surgery.

He became anxious, told her he did not know how to do a lot of things, and did not take his daily medication.

“Then, he lost the ability to (keep track of) his money,” she said. He spent around \$3,000 on 4-D and Toto over four months, whereas previously, he had never spent more than \$200 a month on these tickets, she added.

“I really panicked... He told me that he didn’t know the \$10 (that he spent on the tickets) would be gone; he thought that the money would always be there,” said Ms Teng, 46, an educator at Pathlight School who had by then switched

to working part time to take care of her father.

Ms Teng’s mother died eight years ago. Her elder brother is married and lives elsewhere.

Last August, Ms Teng took her dad to a memory clinic, where he was diagnosed with dementia. The next day, he overdosed on his medication and was rushed to hospital.

They visited a dementia daycare centre after that, but Ms Teng said her father was surprised at the idea, as many of the people they saw that day were using wheelchairs and had a more advanced state of dementia.

She and her father, Mr Teng Hock Bee, now 82, opted to join a Meeting Centre support programme for people living with mild to moderate dementia in the community, and their caregivers. They had learnt about the programme from a hospital social worker.

Twice a week, they take a short

walk to Onesimus Village, a senior activity centre at a Housing Board void deck in Kebun Baru to attend two-hour group sessions.

There, the former taxi driver can socialise with others and engage in activities to stimulate him cognitively. Ms Teng can connect with caregivers, and get information and help on living with dementia.

Mr Teng likes the engagement enough to walk over on his own for another two sessions during the week, when his daughter is at work.

When The Straits Times dropped in on a session last week, he was happily discussing the ethnic snack putu mayam, which he was having for tea. He chatted and joked with programme lead Tan Jun Wei, and “bought furniture” in the Courts edition of Monopoly that he played with other participants, including his daughter and two volunteers.

Dementia is a syndrome that causes progressive deterioration of the brain function. An estimated one in 10 people here aged 60 and above has some form of dementia,

and the number is set to rise as Singapore ages rapidly.

Meeting Centres, piloted by Dementia Singapore in July 2020, offer activities tailored to the needs, interests and abilities of the participants. For instance, at Kebun Baru, Mr Teng enjoys starting the session with a discussion in Mandarin on news events of the day.

Ms Ivy Ho, who manages the programme at Dementia Singapore, said the model is adopted from Britain (the team was trained by the UK Meeting Centre team) and the Netherlands, where the first Meeting Centres were set up in 1993.

Dementia Singapore’s plan is to scale up these centres, and it has been working with social service agencies keen to set up Meeting Centres on their premises, she said. It will train staff who will take over the running of the facility.

There are now six Meeting Centres here. The newest centre, located in Sengkang, held its first session on Monday.

The Kebun Baru centre and another pilot in Bendemeer Centre are run by Dementia Singapore. The rest – in Thomson Hills Drive, Yio Chu Kang and Clementi – are hosted by other social service agencies.

Participants meet once a week, except for the centre in Kebun Baru, which holds twice-a-week sessions in English or Mandarin. All the sessions are currently free.

Ms Ho said: “There is a gap in the care pathway after (a person is) diagnosed with dementia and before he goes to daycare.” There are also home engagement services, where caregivers can pay for someone to go to the home to engage with the person with dementia, but the options are limited otherwise, she added.

There are also three-hour sessions at CareLibrary, run by char-

Keen to join a Meeting Centre?

As the Meeting Centre support programme is still in the pilot stage, its members have mostly been referred by hospitals, social service providers or other sources.

However, those who are interested can walk in and undergo an assessment to see if the programme suits them, said Ms Ivy Ho, programme manager for the Meeting Centre Support Programme.

The pilot will end in March 2024, after which Dementia Singapore will focus solely on helping other partners set up their Meeting Centres, instead of running these facilities, she added.

List of Meeting Centres currently accepting walk-ins

MC@ONESIMUS VILLAGE
113 Ang Mo Kio Avenue 4, #01-343, Singapore 560113
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10am-noon and 2pm-4pm
Contact Mr Tan Jun Wei on 6856-4612, Junwei.tan@dementia.org.sg or e-mail peggy.wong@sws.sg

MC@THK 645 AAC
Block 645 Ang Mo Kio Avenue 6, #01-4937, Singapore 560645
Saturdays, 9am-11am
Contact Thye Hua Kwan AAC on 6554-7298 or aac.amk645@thkmc.org.sg

MC@THOMSON HILLS DRIVE
Salem Chapel, 1 Thomson Hills Drive, Singapore 574746
Fridays, 9.30am-11.30am
E-mail Salem Welfare Services at peggy.wong@sws.sg

MC@LIONS BEFRIENDERS
Block 366 Clementi Avenue 2, #01-527 Singapore 120366
Fridays, 2.30pm-4.30pm
Contact Lions Befrienders AAC on 6681-4025 or cla366@lb.org.sg

MC@AMKFSC COMNET 182
ComNet@182 Rivervale Crescent, #01-311, Singapore 540182
Mondays, 2.30pm-4.30pm
Contact AMKFSC ComNet@182 Rivervale Crescent on 6385-0260 or comnet@amkfsc.org.sg

ity Care Community Services Society, and a weekly three-hour Family of Wisdom programme by Dementia Singapore.

These are small group sessions with structured activities but, unlike the Meeting Centre sessions, they are chargeable at \$86.40 a session, inclusive of goods and services tax.

National University of Singapore Emeritus Professor Kua Ee Heok said: “A diagnosis like dementia stirs up emotions of fear, sadness and even anger. Often, in the clinics, doctors may not have time to address these issues, and the suppressed emotions can precipitate depression and irritability.”

“Having regular group meetings for mild or moderate dementia patients can help them unbottle pent-up emotions in a safe environment. Such a focused meeting is better than the usual community meeting for seniors, where discussion topics tend to be free floating.”

He added that for many patients with early dementia, meeting others with a similar illness and sharing their experiences are therapeutic – “the universality factor can help to enhance their mental well-being”.

Carer Catherine Ong sends her 80-year-old brother, who was diagnosed with dementia two years ago, to the three-hour group sessions at CareLibrary twice a week. She said she noticed that his concentration has improved. “He is not so blur,” she said, using the English phrase for “confused”. “And

he looks forward to the sessions.”

Although these group sessions are aimed at people living with dementia, they also benefit caregivers. The Meeting Centres, in particular, also run monthly support group sessions for caregivers.

Ms Teng said she has gathered tips from these sessions to adjust to the changes that will come as her father’s dementia worsens.

As for Ms Ong, 64, a freelance music tutor, she gets a much-needed respite when her brother is at CareLibrary.

“I became a mother to him, and I couldn’t go anywhere. I have to cook, prepare his medications, do his banking stuff for him, go with him whenever he wants to buy something,” she said.

“He is easily conned, so I have to check his messages to see who is messaging him... I felt my whole life taken away from me.”

She did look into sending him to a daycare centre, but was not keen on it after learning that he would have to stay put the whole day, and that she would not be able to visit or see what he is doing.

“I feel so free when he is (at CareLibrary). I know he is learning something, and he is safe,” said Ms Ong.

Ms Elaine Goh, team leader at CareLibrary, said: “When they come here and they have somebody to talk to, they feel more joyful. This is what their caregivers tell us.”

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Cats helping nursing home residents boost their mobility

Shermaine Ang

Mr Teo Kok Leng is a man of few words, but cats have always liked him.

Last Friday, he sat caressing one and rubbing its ears, as the feline stretched luxuriously.

“I like cats and dogs, they are very cute,” said the 47-year-old, smiling. After suffering a stroke, Mr Teo’s right hand is weak, but he can use his left to pet his furry friends.

He is one of the residents at National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) Health Nursing Home (Chai Chee) who got to play with 13 cats as part of a programme to help improve the residents’ mobility.

Called Purrs for Hearts, the programme was launched at NTUC Health Nursing Home (Jurong West) on June 28.

Organised by art jamming cat cafe Wildflower Studio, the monthly programme guides residents with mobility issues, such as amputees and the bed-bound elderly, to feed, carry and play with the cats using toys.

It is being piloted at the two nursing homes till December.

Ms Siti Zubaidah, a senior physiotherapist at the Chai Chee home, said that while dogs and horses are frequently used in animal-assisted activities, cats can play a role when residents are afraid of large ani-



NTUC Health Nursing Home (Chai Chee) residents interacting with cats at the home last Friday. It is part of a monthly programme that guides residents with mobility issues, such as amputees and the bed-bound elderly, to feed, carry and play with the cats using toys. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

mals, or are unable to interact with dogs for religious reasons.

Centre director of the Chai Chee home, Mr Jack Sim, said the resi-

dents were excited about the session, especially those who used to own or play with cats.

Ms Siti said petting and stroking

a cat can improve joint mobility, while lifting and cradling the cats are akin to strengthening exercises carried out in physiotherapy ses-

sions.

Interacting with cats can also offer sensory stimulation, especially for stroke survivors.

Even when the cats wander around the room, following their movement by moving one’s eyes allows the residents to exercise their eyes and necks. It can also benefit residents who have eye movement disorders due to stroke.

Ms Siti said many of the residents at the home spend their time lying in bed, so interacting with the cats helps those with limited mobility with their fine motor skills, as it motivates them to move, compared with hoops and balls.

When they lean forward to pet the cats, it improves their balance and sitting tolerance.

Such activities can involve those who are less mobile and more dependent, and offer them a chance to interact with one another.

Madam Mariam Abdul Hami, who has kidney failure and dementia, used to have four cats, but gave them away to her friend.

After cradling one last Friday, the 80-year-old said: “This one reminds me of my cats, they love to be pampered.”

Ms Elsha Loh, 23, a volunteer at the session, had this to say of a resident with dementia: “I was surprised because they told me she won’t understand how to interact with the cats.

“But without being told, she immediately went to feed and pet the cats. It came so naturally to her.”

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