



Connecting Seniors,  
Enriching Lives®

# THE MECHANISMS OF ELDERLY-BEFRIENDING IN SINGAPORE:

*An Exploratory Study*



# WHAT IS BEFRIENDING?

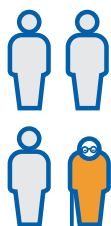
Befriending can be defined as a beneficial relationship that is initiated, supported and monitored by an agency. The relationship, usually built over time, should ideally be mutual and purposeful.

## WHY DO WE NEED TO BETTER UNDERSTAND ELDERLY-BEFRIENDING IN SINGAPORE?

### A RAPIDLY AGEING POPULATION IN SINGAPORE



Adults aged 65 years and above constitute from 9.6% (2008) to 15.2% (2018) of Singapore's resident population



**1/4**

Singaporeans would be in that age group by 2030, up from 1 in 6 today

### BEFRIENDING HAS BEEN SHOWN TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF SENIORS

Befriending can alleviate feelings such as:



Isolation



Loneliness



Depression

Befriending can give rise to positive outcomes such as:



Increased autonomy



Self-esteem



Sense of wellbeing

### GROWING INTEREST IN ELDERLY-BEFRIENDING IN RECENT YEARS



Several social service agencies in Singapore have begun to complement their core programmes with befriending.

### CASEWORKERS AND BEFRIENDERS CAN WORK IN A COMPLEMENTARY FASHION

In the area of casework with elderly, understanding the process of befriending could facilitate rapport-building and care planning.



# THE MECHANISMS OF ELDERLY BEFRIENDING IN SINGAPORE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY



**Research Question:** This study sets out to understand the befriending mechanisms at play in elderly befriending and uncover the practices that lead to successful befriending outcomes in Singapore.



**Motivation for Study:** Past research has focused more on the outcomes of befriending, instead of the process of befriending. There is also a lack of understanding of what makes befriending successful in the local context.



**Methods:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 seniors receiving befriending services from Lions Befrienders Service Association (LBSA). They were asked questions such as “How does the befriender help you feel better?”



**Participant Demographics:** The participants consisted of 5 males and 15 females with a mean age of 78.75. They included 16 Chinese, 2 Malays and 2 Indians.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Summary of Findings

Seniors who have had satisfactory befriending experiences with LBSA identified several characteristics and actions of befrienders that contributed to the success of their befriending relationships. These characteristics and actions activate befriending mechanisms that result in positive befriending outcomes. Additional findings also illuminate the importance of befriending to the elderly.



### What are befriending mechanisms?

Befriending mechanisms refer to the ways in which actions or properties of social networks impact befriending outcomes through various psychological pathways.

### BEFRIENDING MECHANISMS

**Social support:** Feeling emotionally supported

**Social influence:** Monitoring

**Social engagement:** Bonding, reconnecting to social life, positive self-concept

Lead to positive outcomes in seniors

### BEFRIENDING OUTCOMES

Reduces loneliness and helplessness

Increases sense of dignity, self-esteem, perceived sense of security, sense of wellbeing and sense of belonging

# DEEP DIVE INTO MECHANISMS



## VALUED CHARACTERISTICS

# #1



### ACCOUNTABILITY



### SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

*"Sometimes she cannot visit me because of work. She will tell us beforehand every time. She's a responsible person, that's very good." – Senior #13*

Seniors appreciated befrienders being accountable for their visits letting them know if they are unable to make it.

This removes the uncertainty seniors experience and increases the dependability of social ties, triggering a social engagement mechanism leading to a reduction in helplessness and rise in sense of dignity in seniors.

*"On that day, during his visit, I don't know why I felt dizzy. He stayed until I felt better." – Senior #5*

Care and concern shown by the befrienders constitute emotional support for seniors.

The mechanism of emotional support helps to reduce a sense of loneliness and increase self-esteem.



# #2

### CARE



### SOCIAL SUPPORT

*"Every Sunday he will come and visit me. If I was not feeling well, I would tell him, and he would come down two days later to visit me instead." – Senior #6*

Seniors living alone might have a sense of insecurity, worrying that no one knows when they encounter trouble at home e.g. falls/need immediate medical attention.

Being consistent in their visits contributes to befrienders' perceived dependability, and triggers a social influence mechanism involving monitoring.

With the assurance that befrienders are checking in on them (via regular home visits/calls), the seniors may experience an increase in their perceived sense of security.

# #3



### CONSISTENCY



### SOCIAL INFLUENCE



## VALUED ACTIONS

# #4

## CREATING SHARED EXPERIENCES

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

*"There are times when they bring us out to eat and walk and sing. We are very happy when we get to go out." – Senior #19*

Shared experiences between befrienders and seniors, such as going out or doing an activity together, activate the social engagement mechanism.

These experiences facilitate bonding between the seniors and their befrienders, reconnect seniors to social life and foster a sense of companionship. As a result, the seniors feel less lonely and their sense of wellbeing is increased.

### Application Question:

Do you think befriending should be restricted within the home only?



*"Sometimes, when he comes and I have no appetite, he will go and buy porridge for me to eat. He is the best in the world." – Senior #6*

The act of giving and sharing food demonstrates the befriender's care and interest in building a positive relationship with the senior. The shared activity of eating together also contributes towards rapport building.

This gesture triggers the mechanism of social support, which in turn reduces the sense of loneliness in the elderly.



### Application Question:

Do you know what's your befriender's favourite food?



# #5

## GIVING/ SHARING FOOD

SOCIAL SUPPORT

# #6

## HOSPITAL VISITS

SOCIAL SUPPORT

*"She's always willing to help. And when I'm in hospital, quite often these days, she would come to visit me at the hospital." – Senior #9*

The act of visiting seniors at the hospital activates the mechanism of emotional support.

The demonstration makes seniors feel cared for and remembered, which can boost their self-esteem as it reminds them that they still matter to others. This reduces their sense of loneliness, especially when they are warded.

*"I told him I wanted to go and buy medicine. He said 'don't need to walk, I come and fetch you'." – Senior #10*

Assisting seniors in the running of errands is a form of instrumental support and a display of care and concern.

Social engagement and support mechanisms are activated as the action helps raise the senior's sense of perceived social support. When seniors feel supported, their sense of wellbeing is increased and their sense of loneliness is decreased.



**Application Question:**

Have you uncovered any unmet social, emotional or physical needs of befriendees during your visit?



# #7

## RUNNING OF ERRANDS



SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT  
AND SUPPORT

# #8



## SHARING INFORMATION



SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT  
AND SUPPORT

*"The two Malayalee ladies go back to India often. When they return they share stories about their homeland to me. I enjoy listening." – Senior #4*

Seniors enjoy exchanging information with their befrienders such as words of wisdom, current affairs and personal stories.

Such interactions establish reciprocity in befriending relationships and signal inclusivity in social ties, thereby triggering the mechanisms of emotional support and social engagement.

The act of sharing information promotes seniors' sense of belonging and self-esteem.



## ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

*"Sometimes he has to make a move before our conversation finish. But I understand he has a heavy schedule. So if he understands me, I also try to understand him. Also because he's driving, he shouldn't park for too long." – Senior #3*

There is further evidence of reciprocity in befriending relationships, in that seniors show kindness and thoughtfulness towards their befrienders.

While these seniors are recipients of the befriending service, they do not wish to cause any inconvenience to their befrienders. Sometimes, they would seek to give back as well.

This promotes a sense of self-worth and usefulness towards others, which leads to positive self-concept through the social engagement mechanism.



**Application Question:**

Does your befriender try to help or provide advice to you? How did you respond?



# #9

## SHOWING CONSIDERATION TOWARDS BEFRIENDERS



SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT



## IMPORTANCE OF BEFRIENDERS TO SENIORS

In recent years, LBSA has seen a growth in the number of befrienders and befriendees. As of mid-2019, more than 4,200 befriendees were served by around 1,200 befrienders. Our seniors have benefitted significantly from the support of our befrienders.

Results from this study have reflected how befriending has met the social and emotional needs of seniors who are at risk of social isolation. These seniors seek companionship and regular home visits by befrienders have become one of the anticipated activities in their lives.

*Some seniors have shared their appreciation for befrienders:*

Befriending is a form of care. When befrienders come to my house I feel more confident. I can share with them my personal stories from before.

– Mdm G



When the volunteers come to my house and chat with me, I feel more energetic.

– Mr T



When you think no one will come and visit you, but someone comes, you are happy. You'll definitely be happy.

– Mdm L



This booklet is not meant to be prescriptive, rather it was developed in the spirit of sharing to highlight several features of a successful befriending relationship and encourage befrienders to think about their own practices. Nonetheless, our Befriending Programme will continue to provide befrienders with relevant development and training opportunities to upgrade your befriending skills.

### Citations

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