



# Social Cohesion and Better Public Health – Why Community Ties Matter

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## **Social Cohesion and Better Public Health – Why Community Ties Matter**

*By Claribel Low*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Social cohesion is vital not just for maintaining societal harmony and stability but can also contribute towards improved public health outcomes. The need to strengthen social connectedness has become more pressing than ever. To achieve this, a concerted, multisectoral approach is required, and efforts must begin now.*

### **COMMENTARY**

In Singapore and Southeast Asia, social cohesion discourse is often focused on preserving societal stability, particularly among diverse racial and religious communities. This is no doubt essential, but it eclipses an oft-overlooked and important aim: Contributing to physically and mentally healthy populations.

Social cohesion can be a [significant determinant of wellbeing](#) in societies. It provides the foundation for fostering connectedness, and conversely, having strong connections would also enhance a society's cohesiveness. A highly cohesive society would find it easier to maintain connections and stay resilient through challenging times. These connections, in turn, enable individuals to feel involved and engaged with their communities. Strengthening these links is vital in a world that appears lonelier and more fragmented than before.

### **Social Cohesion to Mitigate Loneliness in Singapore**

Loneliness, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), is an epidemic and a global [public health threat](#), with the aged appearing to be the most severely impacted group. The negative [impact of social isolation and loneliness](#) on individuals' health "is comparable to that of...smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity".

The loneliness phenomenon has been growing in Singapore. In the past five years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a noticeable rise in the cases of [elderly passing away alone at home unnoticed](#), signalling an upward trend of social isolation for some segments of the aged demographic.

To address this growing issue, social cohesion and connectedness need to be improved. Findings from a [recent study published by the National University of Singapore](#) underscores that overall health is a composite of physical, mental and social well-being. These, in turn, are influenced by the strength of social ties forged. Therefore, nurturing social connectedness among the aged would tackle the loneliness challenge as well as improve the nation's overall health at the same time.

[Another study](#) found that seniors living in neighbourhoods with robust social cohesion reported having a better quality of life. Cross-nation comparative surveys have also shown that countries with similar levels of healthcare resources and service provision could nonetheless [produce vastly different population health outcomes](#). In particular, societies with higher levels of social inclusion and cohesion tend to report better health. Taken together, these findings point to the need for societies to take loneliness, social connectedness and social cohesion seriously should they wish to improve their populations' overall health.

As Singapore's population rapidly ages, ensuring that we have a robust healthcare system has become more pressing than ever. For a society to be truly healthy, healthcare must be viewed and envisioned in a more holistic manner, and this includes deepening the networks between communities from diverse backgrounds.

Strengthening social cohesion will become increasingly imperative if we want our seniors to stay engaged and healthy. Much of the nation's focus has been on developing and expanding existing healthcare infrastructure to cope with the changing demands that a rapidly ageing population entails. However, addressing these challenges requires us to look upstream towards the strength of existing embedded social networks and the social cohesion that is fostered as a result.

### **Social Cohesion to Strengthen Mental Health and Improve Happiness of Singaporeans**

Another area where social cohesion can have a positive impact is happiness and overall mental health. Apart from our physical health, social connectedness has just as much of an impact on our happiness, and its value for our overall well-being must not be underestimated. While economic progress has improved Singaporeans' collective quality of life over the past few decades, that [effect has gradually tapered](#) off in recent years. Once financial security has been attained, Singaporeans tend to view [having strong networks and a sense of purpose](#) as more essential to their happiness and mental well-being.

The latest findings from the World Happiness Report seems to corroborate this observation as Singapore's ranking fell despite rising income. The Singaporeans surveyed perceived the [social support they are getting from relatives or friends as](#)

[dwindling](#), and experts have attributed this as the key reason for this reduction in happiness. For Singaporeans to feel happier and mentally healthier, more must be invested in fostering social ties, both at the communal and institutional levels, and this needs to go beyond the network of kinship considering shrinking household sizes and family networks.

## **Strengthening Social Connectedness for a Happier and Healthier Collective**

Crucially, all these associations point to the importance and need for interdisciplinary and multisectoral collaboration between those engaged in fostering community ties in neighbourhoods as well as those working in the healthcare sector, particularly in the eldercare social service sectors.

An enhanced and collaborative approach to strengthening connectedness would improve public health outcomes and the nation's overall quality of life. For instance, nursing staff who visit elderly at their home for regular reviews can also encourage their patients to reach out to their immediate neighbours to broaden their patients' network of care capital.

Some efforts aimed at nurturing and strengthening social cohesion are, fortunately, already underway. Across Singapore, organisations have piloted programmes to foster intergenerational bonding by [gathering toddlers and seniors together](#) for a wide range of activities, like reading, cooking and arts and crafts. These programmes offer opportunities for the young and old to interact and learn from one another. They allow our seniors to remain integrated and stave off their loneliness while our young get to learn from the experiences and wisdom of the aged. Such relationships can go a long way in cultivating healthy habits and fostering understanding across generations.

If we are asking how we could become a happier and healthier society, the answer may very well be in building, sustaining and strengthening our engagements both within and between communities. The association between social cohesion and better health outcomes must not be kept as an afterthought. If anything, there needs to be a more concerted effort at explicating and emphasising this link. To cultivate a happier and healthier Singapore, effort must be invested in fostering social connectedness just as much as we invest financially in expanding and upgrading our healthcare infrastructures.

## **Conclusion**

Social cohesion should therefore remain on our agendas, whether nationally, regionally or internationally. The discourse surrounding it, however, must expand and acknowledge that our efforts at strengthening cohesiveness matter so much more given that it directly concerns our happiness and health.

As the WHO Commission on Social Connection argued in a recently published [landmark report](#), “[S]ocial connection is essential for the health, strength and resilience of individuals and societies... The consequences of social disconnection are severe – and the solutions are within our reach”. The work to strengthen social

connections and cohesion must continue; where it has not yet begun, it needs to begin now.

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