

HOME

JURONG COUNTRY CLUB'S
ALLEGED CPF ARREARS B6



Ms Evelyn Khoo (in red), who started Chit Chat Cafe, interacting with participants last Saturday. Chit Chat Cafe enables people with aphasia to practise communication in an understanding environment, which could aid recovery. ST PHOTOS: TIMOTHY DAVID

Pop-up cafe for stroke survivors with aphasia

Support network provides safe space for them to socialise, while raising awareness

Rei Kurohi

Ms Evelyn Khoo, 41, runs a pop-up cafe with an unusual concept.

It is open just one Saturday a month, at a different location each time, and charges no money – orders are paid for in free vouchers issued to customers as they enter.

At Chit Chat Cafe, where volunteers serve toasted sandwiches, cake and drinks, the only “customers” are people with a condition known as aphasia.

People with aphasia can have difficulty speaking and understanding speech, reading and writing, or some combination of these. It is acquired when the regions of the brain responsible for language are affected after a stroke.

Ms Khoo, a speech and language therapist at the Abilities Beyond Limitations and Expectations (Able) rehabilitation centre, decided to start Chit Chat Cafe as a support network for people with aphasia when she realised there was little awareness about the condition even among those who have it and their caregivers.

The cafe held its first official session last Saturday morning at the NTUC Health Silver Circle Senior Care Centre in Serangoon Central with the help of 37 volunteers. The

cording to their age, interests and the severity of their aphasia. One to two facilitators – professional speech therapists such as Ms Khoo – joined each group at their table as the participants chatted about their lives and shared their experiences with aphasia.

The conversations were relaxed and cheery as other smiling volunteers, acting as servers, flitted between tables taking orders.

Many of the patients Ms Khoo has worked with were confident and outgoing before their stroke, but became withdrawn after they developed aphasia.

Some may also avoid going for therapy because of pride or frustration at performing therapy tasks, she said. Those who do attend therapy may be able to complete the exercises perfectly in a clinical setting, but can stumble when faced with real-life situations.

“We want them to be able to transfer what we teach them in the clinic into the real world,” said Ms Khoo.

Chit Chat Cafe is meant to provide a safe space for people with aphasia to practise communication and socialise in a casual and understanding environment. This could help them overcome their own psychological barriers to recovery.

Ms Khoo said: “One common mis-

language well. There’s so much going on in their heads, but they just can’t express it.”

Besides the sit-down “chit chat” session in the cafe, the volunteers facilitate games and even put on live music performances. The sessions also give people with aphasia and their caregivers an opportunity to learn more about the condition.

Retired stock broker Glen Low, 52, and retired financial analyst Wong Siew Cheong, 75, were two of the participants at the cafe last Saturday.

Mr Low suffered a stroke about seven years ago. Before that, he had worked overseas extensively, spending years in countries like Australia and Russia. Through a

combination of speech and writing, Mr Low said he enjoyed the musical performances and was glad to have made some new friends.

Mr Wong has had aphasia for the past nine years. His wife and caregiver, Mrs Wong Lee Yong, 71, said he had been looking forward to coming for the session since he attended the pilot session last month.

Last Saturday, Ms Khoo gave a short presentation in English and Mandarin on the condition, highlighting how those who have it can recover and improve their communication. The volunteers then sang Christmas carols to round off the two-hour session.

The initiative is supported and funded by the Singapore National Stroke Association (SNSA) and venue sponsors such as NTUC Health and Able.

Chit Chat Cafe sessions are currently set to run on the fourth Saturday of each month and are facilitated in English. The next session will be held in Bukit Batok on Jan 26 next year.

Anyone who is interested in attending can e-mail the volunteers at aphasiag@gmail.com or join the Chit Chat Cafe Facebook group.

SNSA is in the process of applying for grants for Chit Chat Cafe, with plans for expansion.



Volunteers singing Christmas carols and engaging participants at the Chit Chat Cafe session. The cafe is open one Saturday a month and orders are paid for with free vouchers issued to those who attend.

What is aphasia?

Aphasia is a language impairment usually resulting from damage to the brain after a stroke. A stroke happens when blood supply to the brain is interrupted by blockage, such as from a clot, or internal bleeding.

Aphasia manifests as a difficulty in either language comprehension, expression, or both, depending on which area of the brain was affected. This can affect both speech and writing.

While there are no official statistics on the condition in Singapore, the United States National Aphasia Association estimates that it affects between 25 per cent and 40 per cent of stroke survivors and is more common than Parkinson’s disease or cerebral palsy.

Older people are more likely to suffer a stroke, but it can even affect teenagers. Speech therapist Evelyn Khoo said the youngest stroke survivor with aphasia she had seen was just 24.

“The younger patients tend to recover better and faster as their brains have greater neuroplasticity,” she said, referring to the brain’s ability to form new neural connections and adapt to damage.

People with aphasia may not be able to return to their previous jobs, especially in areas like sales which rely heavily on verbal communication. Those who are older may choose to retire. Others may become dependent on a caregiver.

They often experience depression and social isolation as a result.

The Fast test can be used to determine if a person has had a stroke:

- Face: Can the person smile? Is his face drooping on one side?
- Arms: Can the person raise both arms and keep them there?
- Speech: Can the person speak clearly and understand what is said to him?