

DIGITAL devices have brought older adults closer to the world; yet in some cases, they have drawn them further away from it. As screen use rises among seniors, experts say the real challenge is not whether to use digital tools, but how to use them well.

As Universiti Malaya Head of Geriatric Medicine Prof Dr Tan Maw Pin explains, over the years, smartphones have brought benefits for older adults, mitigating accessibility issues, and allowing them to remain socially connected with friends and family regardless of geographical location.

Unfortunately, there are also downsides. Those who used to go out all the time to meet people may now leave the house less, exchanging physical interactions for smartphone use. There are also other unwanted effects of excessive screen use.

"The older person may choose to spend hours playing games – they can be so addictive – watching videos, and switching to sedentary activities, instead of being physically active," says Dr Tan in an e-mail interview with *Sunday Star*.

She also warns of the rising number of scam cases and how some older adults may have limited ability to distinguish between genuine and fake information and fall prey to fake news and even scams.

"Many have become converted anti-vaxxers, which is particularly vexing for me as their doctor. They also like forwarding video and cynical posts, negatively influencing others."

Unfortunately, the world is not very aged-friendly, and an older adult may feel much safer in their own environment. Under these circumstances, smartphones are a handy tool to bridge that gap.

"They may not be able to drive either because they never learnt how, can no longer afford to keep a car due to limited retirement savings, or have stopped driving either on their own or because their adult children asked them to."

"Getting around is, therefore, difficult. They may also have lost many friends to disability, illness and death, limiting their social circle. The smartphone suddenly connects them to new people through social media platforms," Dr Tan explains.

For many seniors and their adult children, the challenge is to encourage healthier screen habits without cutting them off from digital tools. But the problem is how – and even Dr Tan admits that it is not an easy task.

"This is a trick question! Older people are notorious for not listening to their adult children. It's just evolutionary! Though their grandchildren will fare better. Older adults need peers and people in authority to influence their behaviour."

"It is therefore a government and societal role to help educate, increase awareness and empower older adults in terms of safe smartphone use," says Dr Tan.

She cautions that we should not discourage smartphone use for older adults as it is very liberating and has many more advantages than disadvantages; rather, the emphasis should be on encouraging responsible use.

Finding screen-life balance for seniors



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Seniors more impacted

Excessive screen use among older adults is an emerging concern, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, says Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) senior lecturer and consultant clinical psychologist Dr Ponnusamy Subramaniam.

"Increased smartphone adoption among older Malaysians driven by communication needs, entertainment, and access to services has led to longer and less regulated screen use, especially among those who are socially isolated," says Ponnusamy, who is from UKM's Clinical Psychology and Behavioural Health Programme.

But where does the distinction lie between healthy screen use, and harmful dependence?

Ponnusamy explains that screen use becomes problematic when it begins to displace essential daily activities such as physical movement, sleep, face-to-face interaction, or self-care, or when individuals show distress, irritability, or loss of control when unable to access digital devices.

Another worry is that seniors are more susceptible compared with other age cohorts.

"Older adults may be more vulnerable compared with younger groups due to retirement-related boredom, loneliness, reduced mobility, and limited alternative recreational options."

"Lower digital literacy can

also make them more susceptible to excessive passive consumption – for instance, endless scrolling or video viewing rather than purposeful use," he says.

Furthermore, negative effects of excessive screen use among seniors are often subtle and missed, as they may be wrongly attributed to "normal ageing". Physical side effects may include eyestrain, poor sleep quality or sedentary-related health issues. Mentally, seniors who are constantly on their phones may experience increased anxiety, low mood or cognitive overload.

It also impacts their social engagements and relationships. Older adults who use screens excessively may withdraw further from real-world social engagement and family interactions, says Ponnusamy.

Nevertheless, the issue is not screen use itself, but how and why screens are used, says Ponnusamy, who explains that digital tools can enhance autonomy and wellbeing in older adults when used intentionally and in moderation.

Some practical measures to avoid screen dependence include encouraging balanced routines that combine screen use with physical and social activities, and promoting digital literacy programmes, says Dr Ponnusamy. It is also important to design age-friendly community spaces and programmes that offer offline engagement.