

Active Ageing Starts at Six

He scales dizzy peaks, scuba dives in intrepid waters, treks regularly, plays court games and is active in community and volunteer work. Daniel Koh's life reads like the résumé of any young, vibrant explorer.

But Daniel Koh is 72 years old and a heart attack survivor.

Relating the life-changing experience that happened in 1985 when he was playing badminton, Mr Koh said: "There were warning signs just before it (heart attack) struck. I was in my 40s and on the fast track of corporate life. I had nine episodes of attacks over the next one and a half hours after I collapsed on the court."

What followed included a cardiac bypass surgery, many months of recuperation, a lot of rest, self-monitoring, spiritual and divine healing and medication as well as proper diet and exercise.

Today, the tanned and trim Mr Koh – who was recently named winner of the Active Ager Prudential Prime Award 2008* for his outstanding way of life – remains an avid sportsman who plays badminton four times a week for up to two hours each time, a routine that even younger men would be hard pressed to keep up.

Far from retiring, the former corporate high flyer is busier than ever, helping his son manage his outdoor adventure company and volunteering in community and social work. As an Active Ager Prime award winner, he is invited to speak to other senior citizens on active ageing, an opportunity he finds joy in as he encourages them, some of whom are heart patients or stroke sufferers, to be active both physically and mentally.

"Many people who have had a heart attack or who have gone through surgery are afraid to do anything active. It's a misconception. Many a time that misconception is borne out of fear, ignorance, and simply, lack of confidence", observes Mr Koh.

"Active ageing starts at six, not 60!", he declares. "My grandfather brought me to the jungles when I was six and taught me, among many other things, to fish. My wife and I did the same thing with our own children, who in turn do it with their children, our grandchildren."



Antarctic Expedition 2008

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Enjoying the wonders of underwater marine life and adventure with grandchildren. Wreck scuba diving at Tulumben, Bali 2009

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Atop a mountain pass on trek to Maccu Piccu, Peru, 2007

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He calls it "blessing the future generation"; getting the young to be active now "so that when they are 60, they are already active agers". In fact, it is common to find three generations of the Koh family - grandfather-children-grandchildren – regularly trekking or going on fishing trips together. His sons, now in their 40s, are accomplished outdoorsmen and two of his grandchildren, aged 13, are already PADI-certified scuba divers.

Being active in the outdoors as well as a sports enthusiast from a young age, he has developed the tenacity, confidence and belief to overcome all odds; these were the traits that pulled him through the potentially debilitating heart attack 23 years ago.

"I've always been active, but if you ask me what's the one thing that helped me bounce back, I would say it's the human spirit honed from being outdoors with nature", says Mr Koh.

And to illustrate that positive "can-do" mindset, Mr Koh shares an interesting perspective to debunk the myth that one cannot engage much in physical activities after a heart surgery:

"I tell those who have had bypass surgery – you now have enhanced blood circulation and better oxygen flow, because the diseased blood vessels (that led to the heart attack anyway) have been replaced with healthy, normal ones that work better! Your body's capacity is in fact enhanced as you now have better blood circulation with new 'plumbing'!"

Indeed Mr Koh embodies a quiet and courageous spirit with a zesty love for life, a state of mental wellness that researchers now say is just as important as proper diet and exercise in prevention of or recovery from heart disease. ♥

* The Active Ager Prime Award is presented by Prudential Singapore and Council for Third Age and is given to senior citizens who engage in sports and other activities not normally associated with elderly persons.