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Good health the key to enjoyment of golden years

Ahmad A. Talib

HASHIM says he's old. At 62, and looking more like someone in his late 40s or early 50s, the former civil servant is certainly not old by any standard.

He was a government servant for 37 years and is now a senior executive of a property development company. In fact, he is its executive chairman.

I joined him for a cup of tea at a coffee house recently and found him to be an old man in a hurry. He seemed to have an abundance of energy, ever planning something which challenges him physically and intellectually. What keeps him looking young and active, I asked.

"The key to the joy of living especially at an advanced age is good health. I have been lucky so far, being free of diseases that plague people in their sixties. I am aware that good health is dependent on two important factors - exercise and food.

"Accordingly, I have an intensive exercise workout programmed on a daily basis revolving around jogging, swimming and cycling with golf, squash and other games thrown in whenever mood and interest call for them.

"The cross exercise regime is to break boredom and subject the different muscles to activity," he said.

In between his coffee, Hashim went on: "Some friends have been asking why should I still work at this age. Why not? I'm healthy and fit and work is fun.

"I'm inspired. Our Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, at 74, is still full of zest in managing the country.

"Then there is Tan Sri Basir Ismail, who was my `cikgu' in the then College of Agriculture; Tan Sri Arshad Ayub, who is still active in corporate affairs and business activities and Royal Prof Ungku Aziz are all my icons of healthy and productive lives.

"While there are times one feels it is time to quit, these personalities make one go on and continue to contribute."

He said swimming is his favourite exercise. It is perhaps the best in terms of getting the hands and legs continuously moving and at the same time not exacting stress on any part of the body, unlike say jogging.

Some fitness advisers may have other opinions on this. They would probably advise individuals that a thrice weekly exercise activity is adequate to keep healthy, but Hashim said he opted for a more intense programme on a daily basis.

"A study showed that as one gets older, one needs to undertake activities that will strengthen the bones and muscles.

"The strengthening of these tissues is critical among people of advanced age so as to prevent falls and accidents that can be debilitating to them. The other consideration is keeping the discipline of doing it."

Hashim also gave me his input on diets and nutrition. He's guided by some books on the subject - Marilyn Diamond's "The Fit for Life Cookbook"; E. Soepadmo's "Perubatan Tradisi Malaysia"; Michael Murray's "The Complete Book of Juicing"; and Daniel Reid's "The Tao of Health, Sex and Longevity".

But his biggest challenge appears to come from his wife (like most husbands I know). "My wife, Kamariah, is such a fantastic cook. Try her curry "ikan sambal belacan", chicken chop, curry asam Aceh, vegetable preparations - one can have a few plates of rice at each meal time."

Well, what is your greatest love now, I asked. "The greatest joy and

happiness is to able to spend time with the grandchildren. "I have two, aged five and one, from my youngest sibling. My only son is still single at the age of 36 inspite of the persistent prodding of the mother to give up his bachelorhood.

"Being with grandchildren gives one a different feeling. In many ways it is different from raising your own children. One feels exceptionally close and wishes to shower them with love and gifts - in other words, spoiling them. My wife and I are tempted to do this.

"We usually spend some time during the weekend with them. Between going on adventure journeys, we opt and give priority to be with the grandchildren.

"It feels good to play hide and seek, scribble on scrapbooks, sing lullabies, make faces, tease and do a thousand and one other things with them.

"Life in old age is full of exciting opportunities. Go and get them," was his parting shot.

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