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Subject: (EMBARGOED) Speech by Mr Chan Soo Sen, 16 Apr 00, 9am

Singapore Government

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**SPEECH BY MR CHAN SOO SEN, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY
(PRIME MINISTER' S OFFICE & MINISTRY OF HEALTH),
FOR THE PUBLIC SYMPOSIUM ON "LET'S BEAT IT:
DEPRESSION IN ELDERLY AND WOMEN" ON SUNDAY,
16 APRIL 2000 AT 9.00 AM AT SUNTEC CITY AUDITORIUM**

National Archives of Singapore

Good morning
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

When I was asked to deliver an address at today' s Public Symposium on "Let's Beat It: Depression in Elderly and Women", I was initially a little puzzled. I am not a woman and neither am I an elderly person. So what do the organisers want me to say? Or may be they want to set me thinking about

the stress and pressure women and elderly had to contend with in the coming years.

2 Not wanting to disappoint the organisers, I started to think about the topic. Very soon, I started to feel the stress women and elderly could face, as they feel squeezed between their traditional and new roles. Let's talk about the women first. Women in my mother's and grandmother's generation played their vital roles mainly in the domestic front: as wives and mothers. Few of them have careers. As a wife and mother, she took care of her husband and children, ensured that they had a nice home to return to after work and study. She cleaned the house, cooked everybody's favourite dishes, and ensured that dinner was served hot and on time when everybody came home, tired and hungry, but happy and relieved.

3 Today, society still expects women to be good wives and mothers. At the same time, society also expects women to work. Try taking care of everyone at home, tending to the increasing sophisticated needs of the children, making sure the house is clean, meals are prepared hot and on time, and in addition doing a good job in the workplace, going for skills upgrading, learning for life. I feel a little tired listing these down, and we can appreciate why some may feel depressed. To do a 9-to-5 job in the workplace, and then a 5-to-9 job at home, is simply mind-boggling.

4 How about the elderly? In my grandparents' generation, age was automatically associated with wisdom. Those were the days when knowledge was passed down from generation to generation by words of mouth. The elderly were wise, respected and made to feel important by the traditional society.

5 Today, the society still generally accepts that the older persons have wisdom to offer, as they have been through life. However, the elderly today are no longer the most knowledgeable, since learning is no longer conducted primarily by passing down through the generations. Advancement in science and technology is increasingly rapid. Knowledge in books become obsolete even as they are being printed. Even with internet superhighway, everybody feel great difficulty keeping up. A younger person nowadays rarely goes to

the elderly for information and advice.

6 However, our elderly are brought up at the time when the older persons are revered. That they are no longer so revered is difficult for many of them to accept. Deep in their hearts, they feel they are still wise and have experience they want to share and offer. But they find it hard to communicate with the young. So, they feel lonely, unwanted and depressed!

7 Today' s Symposium on beating depression in elderly and women is therefore timely. That we have such good turnout on a Sunday morning shows the interest we have on the subject. The fact is all of us, whether man or woman, young or old, rich or poor, feel depressed from time to time. I felt depressed in the Civil Service days a few times when I did not get promotions I felt I deserved. I also felt depressed and frustrated a few times during the Suzhou Industrial Park days when promised vital land and infrastructure project approvals were delayed, and I must deliver results on time. I also see my friends, both men and women, undergoing stress in their lives, called mid-life crisis. I am sure they feel depressed from time to time too.

8 For some, depression comes and goes and often leaves little long term effect on the social and physical well-being. For others, the impact can be more severe and may develop into health problems. Looking at those who coped well with depression, allow me to offer three suggestions.

9 Firstly, have a positive attitude towards life. Look at the good side of things, and learn to be contented. There are many things to fight for in life, but not all are worth dying for. Work out our achievable goals in life based on our needs and wants, be honest and realistic about our own ability.

10 Secondly, have passion. Wait ... please do not mistake me. I am not talking about falling in love. I mean passion to be doing something that will make you feel totally relaxed. It can be gardening, shopping, reading, cooking, volunteering or even working – or anything that keeps you occupied and satisfied. I know a very career-minded lady who feels total relaxation ironing clothes. I know a grandfather who spends hours clearing up his garden. Both are happy and robust, doing well in their businesses.

11 Thirdly, have a network of people. Build a good social support network with your family or friends. Such relationships are vital towards relieving depression. Family and friends can offer emotional support when you feel depressed, or with whom you can pour out your problems and share your concerns. We will all feel better after pouring out. Even if the problems remain, we are able to see them in perspective, and we feel more empowered after sharing.

12 These are some ways of coping with stress and beating depression which I found useful as a lay person. I believe they apply to women and elderly too. Our experts, such as Associate Professor Dr Edmund Chiu, from Australia, and Dr Pauline Sim, from the Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre and Visiting Consultant to KK Women's and Children's Hospital, are all experts in this area. We look forward to listening to them. Together we can all play a part in beating depression in us, our families and friends.

13 On this upbeat note, I shall now declare the Public Symposium on Depression in Elderly and Women open.

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