

Frequently Asked Questions

Volunteering to support wellness

What does 'active' ageing mean?

Across the globe, keeping people well as they age is becoming more of a priority. We know that we have a growing ageing population and people are choosing to stay in their own homes for as long as possible as they age.



One of the best ways to look after the wishes of individuals and meet the needs of the community is for older people to maintain good health.

Increasingly, research tells us that good health comes from keeping active, maintaining good nutrition and keeping up good lifestyle habits like keeping well-hydrated, being sunsmart and quitting smoking.

We also think about being 'active' in terms of being active in your local community and with your network of friends, actively making decisions about your own life and keeping active mentally.

What does wellness mean for the people we work with?

The focus on wellness means that we want to support older people to continue to live an independent and active life in their own home for as long as possible. Not so long ago, we thought 'doing things for' people was best. The current approach is to work with clients and support them. For example, imagine you're supporting a client who loves gardening but has recently had a fall and has lost some confidence. If they wanted to pick some flowers from the garden, you could walk with the client and just be there to make sure they don't fall. In this case, the client is able to safely do something they love and gain a little confidence. Simple as it sounds, this means the client is taking an active role in their own life. They feel empowered and they are keeping active.

Not all of our clients can do as much as they would like, but it is still important that they are making their own choices as far as possible.

But I volunteered so I can help people...isn't this needed anymore?

Yes – volunteers play a vital role in providing Support at Home services across Victoria. The key message for volunteers is to support older people to stay as active as they possibly can. Volunteers play an important role by 'being beside' clients – taking them out in the community, chatting with them, driving them to places they would not otherwise get to, making sure they have a meal delivered to them after a stay in hospital. Without this volunteer support, many people would not be able to stay in their own homes.

So, volunteers are very much needed, but sometimes the best thing a volunteer can do is nothing! Staying near the person and supporting them to look after themselves is great for everybody.

I've been volunteering for 20 years. Was all that work a waste of time?

Definitely not! No doubt you did many different things over that time and have seen many changes take place as volunteering evolves.

The contribution of volunteers is as important now as it ever was, it's just changed its focus so it is less about doing things for people and more about supporting people to do things for themselves.



I've just started volunteering...What does this mean for me?

The message is the same for new and current volunteers – it's about 'doing with' people rather than 'doing things for' them. As a new volunteer, you may have some fresh ideas about new activities we can organise with the people in our services or new ways our organisation can do things.

But everyone is so busy...Isn't it easier for me to just do it?

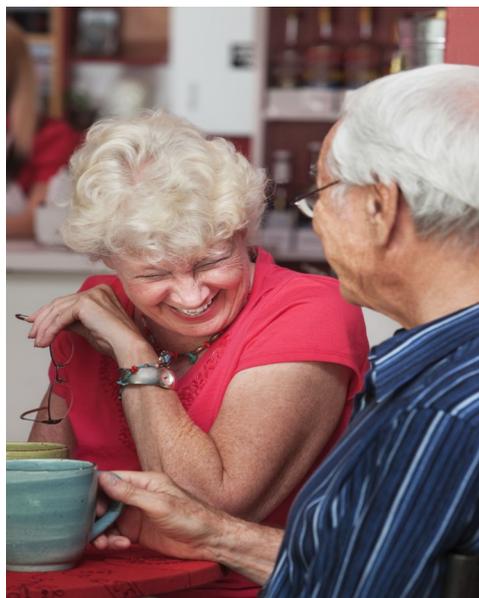
Unfortunately, we are all busy and under time pressures and this is exactly why volunteers can make such an important difference to the quality of people's lives. Where staff might be pressured for time, volunteers can spend those extra minutes with one or two people, assisting them to serve themselves or walk up the steps or get out of the car.

Of course, it is often easier for someone else to do the task – but that's not the point, is it? Services are about doing what's best for the client, no matter how much longer that may take.

I don't want to do something that's dangerous for the client

No – and the organisation strongly agrees with you! It's important that you are aware that the organisation has assessed the client to see what they are capable of doing and what they want to do. The things we ask you to do are part of the client's care plan and reflect the goals that the client would like to achieve.

We also make sure that we monitor clients, to check whether their goals have changed for any reason. We keep this information in the client's care plan. As a volunteer, you are not expected to do anything that you feel is risky for the client or for you.



We also require that you tell us what you observe about the client. If you think someone is struggling with a task, make sure you let your supervisor know. It may be that the person needs to be assessed again or to set new goals for their care.

Our clients like to be looked after, what's wrong with that?

Essentially there is nothing wrong with 'being looked after'; we can all relate to that feeling! However, it is really important to encourage people to be as active in managing their own lives as possible – and to keep this up on a daily basis.

One way to think about this is to recall a time when you were out of action – maybe just with a bad flu, or after surgery or having children. Can you remember what it felt like, trying to get back on your feet? You may have literally felt

dizzy and needed to take time to get back to feeling strong and healthy if you'd stopped doing things for a while.

As we age, we naturally lose muscle strength and flexibility and our range of motion is reduced. This can happen gradually over the years, without people noticing, but as people age it can become a vicious cycle – it's hard to move, so you don't, and then it becomes harder again to move and so on. It's easier to remember the old phrase - 'Use it or lose it'.

Rather than thinking of 'looking after' people as waiting on them, think of looking after people as encouraging them to keep as active as possible. Volunteers can make people feel needed and able to contribute. In fact, you can play a great role in encouraging and motivating people and giving them confidence.

Does 'active' always mean doing something physical?

No, not at all. It can be something mentally active – like playing a game of chess or backgammon or reading a book or discussing a newspaper article. It can be talking about a piece of music or reminiscing. We think about being active on physical, social and emotional levels. Maybe another way to think about it is that it is the opposite of inactive!



Image provided by Caladenia Dementia Care

For further discussion

- > Do you have any other questions?
- > What do longer-term volunteers see as the differences between now and when they first started volunteering? And what remains the same?
- > What are some approaches you have developed for working with people who prefer the volunteer to 'do things for' them?