

Stories of active volunteering

Social Support Groups

How do Social Support Groups support people to stay active, independent and connected to their community?

The aim of Social Support Groups has traditionally been to provide a social occasion for clients – a chance to get out, have a cuppa or a meal with familiar friends, join an activity and to provide a break for carers.



Long-term volunteers may have noticed some new directions in Social Support Groups over

recent years. There is now a greater emphasis on supporting people to be as active and independent as possible, taking a flexible, person-centred approach. That means that the service fits the participant rather than the participant fitting the service. Social Support Groups are diverse. Individuals may attend on an episodic, short term or longer-term basis, depending on their assessed needs. Programs include active participation by individuals. This may also include clients designing, planning and delivering activities in consultation with staff and volunteers.

How can volunteers assist Social Support Group clients to stay active and independent?

Volunteers in Social Support Groups can:

- > Spend time in active conversation with people in the group – really finding out about their life and their interests.
- > Chat to people who may seem withdrawn – loneliness is a major issue for older people and having a friendly volunteer to chat to can make a huge difference.
- > Encourage people when you see them 'having a go'.
- > Be patient – if the person just needs some time to do something, hang in there and let them finish – whether that be completing the crossword or finishing a sentence.

What are some handy hints for volunteers?

- > Check with your coordinator and other staff. What do they recommend for each group member?
- > Stop and look first! Before you step in to do something for someone in the group, ask questions like: Are you okay to do ...? Would you like me to ... stay nearby? Give you my elbow to hang on to?
- > Check your language. The way we ask questions can be really important. Change questions from: 'Would you like me to do this for you?' to 'Do you need any support from me?' or 'Would you like to do this together?'
- > Observe people in the group and give them feedback. You may be one of the few people who sees this person regularly. Let them know you can see them having a go. Just acknowledge them as a person.
- > Find common interests or experiences so that people in the group can make new connections. 'Have you got a new grandchild ...? So has Shirley' 'Charlie, didn't you go to boarding school too?', 'Didn't you work in a library Ted?'
- > Observe staff - What are some of the things staff say to group members?
- > Actively listen when communicating with clients. 'Active listening' involves being present and attentive to what someone else is saying. It involves viewing the world through the eyes of the person you are communicating with and demonstrating that you understand

their feelings and views by repeating back what you heard, in your own words.

Some useful communication and active listening techniques for volunteers include:

- > communicating with people at their eye level
- > using eye contact and open body language
- > responding in an active way when talking to someone (nodding, smiling, saying yes)
- > using a normal tone of voice
- > using age-appropriate and respectful language when talking to someone
- > avoid interrupting people while they are talking or finishing their sentences
- > finding a quiet space if the background noise makes it difficult to talk to someone
- > summarising what someone has said and asking if you've heard them correctly.

[Connecting through inclusive communication practices](#) provide ideas and techniques for communicating with people from a range of diverse communities and groups.

Key messages

- > One of the greatest gifts volunteers provide is time to really listen to people.
- > Support people to identify what they want to do or get back to doing.
- > Support people to connect with others and with activities as independently as possible.
- > Support people when they indicate they need it, and in the way they wish to be supported.
- > Be patient!
- > Be positive!