

# Age Old Problems: New Aged Care



A podcast by Helping Hand



**Episode Sixteen**

## The Importance of Social Connection



13 minutes

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Episode 16: The Importance of Social Connection



Helping Hand

00:00:00 Kate

Welcome to *Age Old Problems: New Aged Care*, a podcast by Helping Hand that offers information and advice to help you find and access the right aged care services. This podcast was recorded on Kaurua Land.

00:00:22 Kate

Hello, I'm your host, Kate Holland. Thanks for listening to another episode of *Age Old Problems, New Aged Care*. Today we're talking about social isolation. And many of us would have heard about the loneliness epidemic, which peaked during COVID times.

00:00:34 Kate

Despite our almost constant connection to devices, many of us feel disconnected in real life. And for older people, social isolation is almost commonplace. According to aged care research and industry innovation, around one in five older Australians are socially isolated. Reasons include the social, economic and health changes that commonly occur later in life. And these often result in a decline in the quality and quantity of social relationships. And the reality is that being socially isolated or disconnected from community can be really bad for a person's health, even if that person doesn't feel lonely.

00:01:05 Kate

Maria Chabrel is Group Manager, My Life and Social Connections at Helping Hand, and she's joined me today to help pinpoint some of the risk factors and some of the available remedies for social isolation. Welcome Maria.

00:01:15 Maria

Thank you.

00:01:16 Kate

And also joining us is Tony Barrillo and he is a Commonwealth Home Support Programme client and he can talk to us about how social connections have benefited his life. Welcome Tony.

00:01:25 Tony

Thank you. Very glad to be here.

00:01:27 Kate

We'll start with you Maria. Can you please explain your role at Helping Hand? What is it that you do?

00:01:31 Maria

So my role is to lead a team that are delivering services to older people and the combination of services that is social work. So we have social work within our profile, but we also have people working within social connections. So they deliver group programs and also one-on-one social connections as well.

00:01:49 Kate

Beautiful. How long have you been with the organisation?

00:01:51 Maria

I've been twice. First time around, four years. Second time around, this is 2 1/2 years now.

00:01:56 Kate

One in five Australians, that's quite a lot of people feeling socially isolated, isn't it? How does that impact them and what's something that you observe about this?

00:02:03 Maria

So the most recent data, we're looking at 30% of people over the age of 60 experiencing social isolation. Part of the barrier as well is that people don't recognise when they are experiencing social isolation. It tends to happen very, very slowly.

00:02:17 Maria

What can happen is that there is a loss. So they were experiencing loss in the family. It could be a partner, could be friends. The social network becomes a lot smaller. It happens very slowly. That's a risk factor for them.

00:02:29 Maria

We're also looking at the ease of connecting with community isn't quite there. So they used to be able to drive, so perhaps they can't drive anymore. So getting to a place that they would be able to connect now has become difficult. You now need to think every step before that happens. So sometimes that becomes too hard in amongst everything else that's happening in someone's life.

00:02:50 Maria

Health can decline. Getting up in the morning and preparing for an outing can take a little bit longer or it can take more time. So it's easier for someone to say, I'm not going to do that today.

00:03:01 Maria

So that happens once a month, it can happen then once a fortnight, once a week, two or three times a week. And before you know it, someone's experiencing that social isolation.

00:03:09 Kate

And I remember speaking earlier this year to someone who deals with hearing loss too, which would be one of those health things. They mentioned that if people delay improving their hearing, it can make them more nervous in social situations, they end up retreating. So there are lots of small steps that can make a really big impact, aren't there? So what impact can social isolation have on an older person's health and wellbeing?

00:03:28 Maria

So it can decline someone's quality of life and that's a big broad term to describe someone's mental wellbeing and the feeling of connection. We experience positive hormones going through our bodies when we laugh, when we connect, that's absent when we're socially isolated. So we don't have that natural fix that can support us in that as our social networks decrease, we're also increasing our vulnerability. So there's less eyes on us, there's less support, there's less understanding of what we're experiencing and going through. So what happens is then we're more open to scams, we're more open to abuse and neglect from others because we don't have that village that is supporting us that we would normally have if we had those broader social networks.

00:04:13 Kate

Yes, if you're more constantly in conversation with people, then you're checking in and sharing experiences, aren't you?

00:04:18 Maria

And it also is a really good trigger for cognitive decline too. So if you're having those regular conversations, someone can go, "oh, you're becoming a little bit forgetful, have you gone and spoken to your doctor?" Things like that. There are those checks and balances that happen very naturally in our relationships that we take for granted that don't happen or that needed to be manufactured in an environment where we're noticing a social isolation.

00:04:38 Kate

Sure. And energetically, people generally feed off each other's energy, don't you? You have more activity, you might talk to someone like Tony and he's doing some wonderful things and you get inspired and you want to do more. But the more you retreat to yourself, it can become more and more of almost habitual to not go out, can't it?

00:04:53 Maria

Can be, but there's also a really close relationship between the physical health and mental health. We can argue that one comes before the other, but there is such an interconnectedness. And a lot of the times when we're feeling lonely, there's been a lead up to when we recognise that we feel lonely. And before we recognise that, we look around and we're alone, and generally we stop seeing our doctor as well and we stop seeing our dentist, and so all of that starts to decline before we even know it.

00:05:23 Kate

So who is eligible for Social Connections Programs through aged care providers such as Helping Hand? And if someone was interested in tapping into one of these programs, how do they go about getting started?

00:05:33 Maria

So we have funding – so providers have funding from the Commonwealth Home Support Programme and also from the Support at Home Program, so there is an ability to tap into that level of funding. So what people can do is either contact My Aged Care or they can contact us and we have a navigator service that can provide that walk alongside service to support people to connect with My Aged Care to get the relevant funding in order to connect with our programs.

00:05:58 Kate

Excellent. We'll make sure that we have links for those websites and phone numbers, et cetera, in our show notes. So what's Helping Hands' approach to building social connections and what kind of programs do we offer?

00:06:08 Maria

So our programs are very much client driven, so we do have a base of programs that are tried and tested - we do know that clients enjoy a game of bingo, so we try and do that. But what we tend to do is we collect a lot of feedback from clients around what they would love to see happen in their programs and then challenge a little bit, considering that we're sitting from a social isolation perspective: what did you like to do that you would love to do again? And so our most successful groups at the moment are the Lunch Out and About groups where "we used to go to this cafe all the time" – great, let's create a group that we can do that once a week. And they're our most successful groups at the moment. We started with one, we now have two and we're about to create a third. So we allow our people to direct the development of the program and we evaluate the success of that program and asking clients what they would like to see happen. So that's our approach from a program design perspective.

00:07:04 Kate

It seems like you love what you do. What is it that you love most about it?

00:07:08 Maria

I like to remain connected with outcomes that we're trying to achieve. So I love hearing the stories around, we had a Christmas party last year and someone connected with a lifelong friend from school that they hadn't seen in 60 years, and yep, job done! That's exactly what we're looking for, and that connection has thrived. We're creating connections between people who are attending groups that now have friendships and they're educating each other.

00:07:31 Maria

So there's hobbies that are being shared amongst the group attendees that wouldn't have happened if we didn't have these groups. There are contacts now happening outside of the groups. There are phone calls happening on a regular basis that weren't happening before. So it's the beginning of that village network that we're building slowly and the group just happens to be the catalyst for that.

00:07:53 Kate

That's so great. And that sharing of hobbies, I mean, you read articles all the time about how all of us should try and learn a new skill each year, and so if that means people are sharing ideas and sharing hobbies, they're going to keep on being stimulated all the time, aren't they?

00:08:04 Maria

Absolutely.

00:08:04 Kate

Now, Tony, turning to you, what does feeling connected mean to you? How important is it for you to feel connected to other people?

00:08:11 Tony

Well, I look forward to those two hours when I go on Tuesday.

00:08:15 Kate

And what do you do when you go in on a Tuesday?

00:08:17 Tony

Sometimes we watch videos, we watch a documentary. Last week we watched the old story of the Ford and the Alden, which was very interesting because I worked at Alden for 28 years. And I look forward because since I've been there, I think it's about two years now, I made so many friends. And we have a joke, we talk about this, about that.

00:08:40 Tony

We play balls, we play bingo, they always organize something. So we had a BBQ a couple of times already at the park. and the Christmas lunch last year, we already booked for this year. And I really look forward because all these people, more or less all on the same age bracket, and we talk about so many things. And I really look forward to go there every Tuesday for those two hours, because to me it's something different, you know, getting out of the house and also meeting people and doing things for two hours.

00:09:13 Kate

What made you make the decision to find out about it? Were you starting to feel lonely or noticing you weren't going out much?

00:09:19 Tony

Getting older, you never know what's around the corner, you never know what happens. It did happen, so I fell from the step ladder and I broke my femur so I had to have a hip replacement. I'm still lucky that I can drive and it doesn't really bother me but, I said down the road, if something happens and I can't do the things that I'm doing now, so I would need help. So that's why I registered.

00:09:41 Kate

And is this a men's own group is it?

00:09:43 Tony

Yeah, men's own group.

00:09:44 Kate

And do you meet people from all sorts of backgrounds? Have they all got different stories?

00:09:48 Tony

Yes. I met Rob, which he was a guitar player, and he played even Channel Ten ABC, and we talk about, the old days, and he comes from Crystal Brook, and he tells all the stories of when he was young. And I grew up in a farm, so I know all about that. I really enjoy it because I've met so many different people. Some they left, some they come back. Two or three they left, they're not turning up anymore. But still, knowing them, it was good.

00:10:18 Kate

You can see how much you enjoy it. What would you say to somebody else who's a bit unsure, a bit nervous about starting something like this?

00:10:24 Tony

It's a way of going out and meeting other people. We have a good laugh every Tuesday, everybody gets into it.

00:10:31 Kate

What do you think the spin-off effects have been in your life? Do you think it has made you happier and more rewarded in general?

00:10:36 Tony

I always like to talk to people or meet people, we interact and we talk. We know each other in here and been the same people for nearly two years. You know, it's like going to school, to a class and you make friends, it's like the same thing.

00:10:51 Kate

Well, that's beautiful. Now, before we wrap Maria, what's the key? Any piece of advice that you'd like someone who's listening to this episode to take away?

00:10:58 Tony

Get out. Get out and have fun.

00:11:00 Maria

There you go. Get out and have fun. Absolutely.

00:11:02 Maria

But for me, it's don't wait until it's too late. We do match like-minded people to groups. We are currently in a significant development phase where we've had, and Tony, you've experienced this, where we've had the same groups over the last couple of years.

00:11:17 Maria

There's going to be quite a significant injection of brand new groups coming in 2026. Some things with IT where we're connecting people to devices so they can connect with families overseas. Looking at photos and connecting with family and friends, we provide that. They can bring their devices and we can actually show them how to use their own device rather than a device they're unfamiliar with.

00:11:37 Maria

We're looking at museum visits, we're looking at things that people weren't doing before and we're matching people who express a particular interest and hobby, matching them with those groups so those conversations ignite really easily without having to be very hard work.

00:11:52 Maria

I guess my advice would be don't wait until it's too late, bring your friends along and it just supports our wellbeing.

00:11:59 Kate

And tell other people about it.

00:12:00 Maria

Absolutely.

00:12:02 Tony

Well, last year we did the calendar. Everybody brought photos in and they did a calendar for us with all the photos and then we went to visit the Adelaide Gyro, which was very, very interesting. And everybody came that day, even if it was raining, but we all went and we had fun.

00:12:20 Maria

And it was the calendars that actually created that outcome where two people were sitting next to each other and didn't realise that they were school friends because they saw the photos.

00:12:30 Tony

Well, I met this friend of mine, which we went to school together.

00:12:35 Maria

Oh, was it you? Oh, there you go.

00:12:37 Tony

He's two years younger than me. And then he went to Switzerland and I went to France. After, I would say nearly 20 years, we met each other here in Australia.

00:12:50 Kate

There you go, connections lead to connections, hey.

00:12:51 Tony

And we're from the same village, same area, really. We're only about three kilometres away from each other when we used to be young.

00:12:58 Kate

That's wonderful. Oh, look, thank you so much. I think you've both presented very good argument for getting involved in all of this, and it's been lovely to talk to you and in person.

00:13:05 Maria

Thank you.

00:13:06 Tony

It's a pleasure.

00:09:17 Kate

For more information on Helping Hand and their services, please head to [helpinghand.org.au](http://helpinghand.org.au) or call Helping Hand directly on 1300 653 600.