



Meaningful Social Activities

MEANINGFUL LIFESTYLE ACTIVITIES

This evidence theme on meaningful social activities is a summary of one of the key topics identified by a scoping review of meaningful lifestyle activity research.

Key points

- Social interactions are integral to healthy ageing and can help prevent social isolation and loneliness for older adults.
- It is common for older adults to encounter fewer social settings, which often makes them dependent on the community around them for organised activities.
- Aged care residents living with dementia can be reliant on staff members to create opportunities for meaningful social interactions.
- Social activities should be tailored to an individual's personal preferences to ensure they are meaningful.

What are social activities?

Engaging in regular social activities is an important part of healthy ageing and can prevent social isolation and loneliness for older adults. [1] For older adults who maintain social activities and meaningful relationships, life has a purpose and meaning which is important for their long-term health and wellbeing [2]. Participating in social activities can be described as 'involvement in activities that provide interaction with others in society or the community'. [3] These interactions often become more difficult with increasing old age, because of life-changing events and deteriorating health. [1] This means older adults encounter fewer social settings, which can make them reliant on organised activities to experience social interactions [4]. Despite the number of older adults residing in aged care, services often focus on the physical and clinical needs of residents, rather than the need for meaningful social connection with others. [5]

Any social activity offered in aged care should take a person-centred approach. Not everyone will want to participate socially and not all social activities will appeal to those who do wish for social connections. For more information on person-centred care and meaningful lifestyle activities, see the Person-Centred Approach evidence theme.

Are activities promoting social interaction effective?

This research reports that older adults who participate in regular and meaningful social interactions may experience benefits such as:

- Increased levels of physical activity and fitness
- Increased quality of life
- Improved health and wellbeing
- Reduced risk of social isolation, loneliness, and depression
- Reduced risk of dementia. [6]

Four reviews suggested factors that might promote social activity to older people living in residential aged care and make it more 'meaningful'. They found that:

- Meaningful activities were those that met the psychological and social needs of older adults. [7]
- Social interactions usually took place in communal areas such as the dining room and lounge areas, where residents spent most of their day. [8]
- Facilities that had spaces for small groups to meet demonstrated more social interactions than those that did not have communal areas. [8]
- Facilities that reminded residents of the home and allowed them to be surrounded by their familiar objects promoted social engagement between residents and residents and staff members. [8]
- Physical activities often provide aged care residents with the opportunity to socially engage with others in meaningful ways. [9]

Social activities for people living with dementia

For people living with dementia, participation in social activities and one-to-one interactions have proven effective in reducing agitation. [10] Music and musical activities appear to be particularly beneficial and enjoyable, and facilitate social communication for older people who are able and not able to communicate. Musical interventions were found to provide residents with the opportunity to express themselves and connect with others. [11] These interventions were found to be accessible to all aged care residents living with dementia regardless of their abilities. However, the methods used in the supporting evidence

were of low to medium quality and generally quantitative studies found inconclusive results for the use of music interventions to promote meaningful social interactions in aged care. [11]

Limitations on social activities in residential aged care

Despite the benefits of social interaction for aged care residents, opportunities to participate in meaningful social interaction were often limited. Reasons included:

- A reliance on staff and carers to create opportunities for social interaction with other residents [8, 11]
- Pain levels and reduced ability to participate in social activities in communal areas. [13]

A lack of social stimulation has been related to responsive behaviours for residents living with dementia. [12]

What can an individual do?

- Take the time to communicate on a deeper level with aged care residents, getting to know them as individual people, along with their past, present, and future aspirations and their interests, and not simply providing care and incidental conversation.

What can an organisation do?

- Support a sense of community and provide opportunities for older adults to participate in social activities that are engaging, enjoyable, and meaningful.

Evidence limitations

This evidence theme has been informed by the results of a rapid scoping review intended to map the current published research in this area. We acknowledge that our findings reflect only the limited evidence available concerning the concept of 'meaningful' physical activities. Furthermore, our Evidence Advisory Group (EAG) and practice professionals suggest this evidence may not adequately reflect the understanding and practical implementation of meaningful lifestyle activities in aged care.

References

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