



# Social Participation

## SOCIAL ISOLATION

This evidence theme on social participation is a summary of one of the key topics identified by a scoping review of the social isolation research.

### Key points

- Social participation refers to an individual's engagement in various social activities, interactions, and relationships within their community or society.
- Social participation helps combat social isolation by connecting individuals and reducing feelings of being excluded and loneliness.
- This summary suggests a list of effective group-based, multidimensional activities such as a combination of music, exercise, arts, educational programmes, and intergenerational interactions to facilitate social participation and reduce social isolation among older people.

### What is social participation?

Social participation refers to people's engagement in activities that involve interactions within a community or society. [1] Engagement is crucial for all populations, especially among older adults, as it contributes to better mental and physical health outcomes. For example, social participation has the potential to reduce cognitive decline, lower risks of depression, and create a sense of belonging. [2] Social participation can alleviate social isolation and feelings of loneliness. [3, 4]

A broad range of social participation activities for older individuals exists to cater to their diverse needs, interests, and lifestyles. [3, 4] This diversity acknowledges the individuality of aging experiences, allowing older adults to choose activities that suit their preferences and abilities. [3, 4] These activities aim to promote social connections, cognitive stimulation, and a sense of purpose, contributing to better mental and emotional wellbeing. [3, 4]

## What do we know about social participation in older people?

The available evidence, drawn from an analysis of 11 studies, highlights a range of effective activities shown to enhance social participation among older people. [5-15] These activities include choir singing, radio programmes, physical exercise, arts and recreation, educational programmes, as well as participation in psychosocial and nutritional programs. [5-8] Additionally, engaging in social activities to expand social circles and participate in intergenerational interactions has proven effective in boosting social support, promoting self-motivation, and shifting the focus from oneself to others. [5, 8-10]

Moreover, the evidence highlights the importance of engaging in these activities within group settings, as this has been demonstrated to enhance their effectiveness in reducing loneliness and minimising the risk of social isolation. [10-12] Group-based activities play a significant role in strengthening social connections, fostering social integration, and promoting a sense of belonging and companionship within the community. [11, 12] Additionally, undertaking multicomponent activities (i.e. psychosocial group activities and creative arts) has been shown to increase social and community participation among older people. [8, 13, 14]

One review specifically examined social participation activities for older people in nursing homes. [15] The evidence indicates that activities like exercise, craft classes, gardening, and participation in religious activities can increase interactions among residents, add interest to their lives, and reduce feelings of unfamiliarity between them. [15]

## What can an individual do?

- Find out from a person what types of activities they would like to participate in
- Invite older adults to enrol in classes or workshops related to their hobbies or interests. This could prove a great way to enhance or acquire new skills, as well as interact with like-minded individuals.
- Initiative conversations with older adults to create meaningful connections.
- Provide information and access (i.e., transportation) to local events, gatherings, or cultural activities. This can provide opportunities to allow older adults to meet people and engage in social interactions.

## What can an organisation do?

- Collaborate with community organisations and agencies to expand the range of services and social participation opportunities available to older adults.
- Prioritise group-based activities to strengthen social connections and minimise feelings of loneliness and social isolation, recognising the importance of a sense of belonging and companionship.
- For organisations working with older adults in nursing homes, find out from older people what they are interested in doing and use this information to design a varied range of activities. This could include exercise, chess, literature, information sessions on areas of interest, craft classes, digital technology, gardening, and religious engagement to promote interactions, add interest to residents' lives, and reduce unfamiliarity among them.

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Cite as: ARIIA Knowledge & Implementation Hub. Social participation. Social Isolation. Evidence theme. Adelaide, SA: ARIIA; 2022 [updated 2023 Nov]

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For more information email [ariia@ariia.org.au](mailto:ariia@ariia.org.au) or call 08 7421 9134

ARIIA - Level 2, Tonsley Hub, South Rd, Tonsley SA 5042

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