The Benefits of Social Support

Sarah Yeates

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Good morning and thanks so much to the eastern Sector Development team for inviting me to introduce today.

I have worked in this area for over 25 years, and under the many names and guises. ADASS, PAG and now social support.

I know many of you will relate when I say that our programs and services are often undervalued, and misunderstood, and that the value of the service is often reduced to "a friendly cuppa", when you and I know that what we do is so much more. I have heard workers from other departments say they envy the social support staff because all they do is "play games".

If they could only see all the planning and hard work that goes into making a program look like it runs itself – they wouldn't

Social Support programs like mine – like yours bring such a wide variety of benefits to those who use them, cleverly disguised as a social day out.

The Mayo clinic says that for an older person, an informal support network can

- Improve the ability to cope with stressful situations.
- Alleviate the effects of emotional distress.
- Promote lifelong good mental health.
- Enhance self-esteem.
- Lower cardiovascular risks, such as lower blood pressure and increase incidental and purposeful movement and exercise

The benefits of a formal social support program have even further reaching benefits, which include, and are passed on to the family members as well.

But these benefits increase in tandem with the amount of input or ownership a person has over their own choices around their lifestyle and socialisation

In the 1970s a study was done with nursing home residents in the US.

One group of participants was encouraged to find ways to make more decisions and choices for themselves. For example, they were allowed to choose where to receive visitors, and if and when to watch the movies that were shown at the home. A choice of breakfast was introduced with either scrambled, boiled or fried eggs. Each also chose a houseplant to care for, and

they were to decide where to place the plant in their room, as well as when and how much to water it. The intent was to make the nursing home residents more mindful, to help them engage with the world and live their lives more fully.

A second, control group received no such instructions to make their own decisions; they were given houseplants but told that the nursing staff would care for them. They were given a night to attend the movie that was chosen by the staff. And boiled eggs were introduced to the breakfast menu 3 days a week.

A year and a half later, it was found that members of the first group were more cheerful, active, and alert, based on a variety of tests that had been administered both before and after the experiment.

Allowing for the fact that they were all elderly and quite frail at the start, it was positive that they were also much healthier: it was surprising, however, that less than half as many of the more engaged group had died than had those in the control group.

The explanation was thought to be that the results were due to the positive power of people being able to make their own choices and the increased personal control that this affords to the individual.

Beyond the community aspects, we know that social support programs reduce isolation and increase activity levels, but when participants truly have choices to make and control over their own leisure time and social engagements, the benefits increase dramatically.

As an industry we are just learning to actually measure, to capture some of these outcomes beyond the ubiquitous feedback form that always says "you do such a great job, I love coming". That is lovely to hear – but doesn't tell us what we are doing right, or what we could be doing better.

We have all done evaluations of programs – "everyone said they enjoyed the day". "Most people said they would visit the place again", "

We need to start digging further and asking different questions if we want to get different answers.

We need to be asking not **"did you like it"** but rather **"what has changed for you as a result of this?"**

Once we can capture change for the better amongst our participants – we can actually start to measure the positive impact of social support in all our services.

We might be able to measure a change in mood, a change in physical ability, a change in ability to cope, or a change in independence at home.

Being able to measure these outcomes, and show a positive change due to a person's involvement – will prove to funding bodies and decision makers that social support is definitely more than just a friendly chat over a cup of tea!!

I hope you get some inspiration – some new ideas from today – there is so much experience and expertise in the room.

But I hope you get more than just new activity ideas. I hope you get some ideas on enhancing the activities you already do – adding more participant input, adding more choices to people's already good experiences.

I hope you gain ideas for adding an evaluation component and finding out exactly how what you do enhances people's lives.

Thanks so much – enjoy the rest of the day.

Thanks so much and I hope you enjoy the day