



SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Stories of resilience and 'getting back out after COVID'



Funded by

phn
ADELAIDE

An Australian Government Initiative

COTA Social Connections - getting back out after COVID

Older South Australians are among those most at risk of COVID-19, and from March 2020 were encouraged to restrict their activities and to stay home. Social interactions were constrained by regular outings, social groups, and other opportunities to engage with a purpose were moved online, stopped, or continued with restrictions. People living alone and not online were particularly affected. For some, pre-existing isolation was compounded.

It can be difficult for some people to identify activities that are enjoyable, align with personal goals and provide the opportunity to interact with and have relationships with others. This is not just the case following community disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic, but also after other life changes that may come with age, such as the death of family or a partner, retirement, or changes in health, mobility, transport access, or a loss of confidence or motivation.

Adelaide Primary Health Network (APHN) funded COTA SA in 2021 to deliver a peer support project for older people to help them find and connect with meaningful social activities and supports to improve wellbeing.

COTA SA recruited and supported a team of dynamic peer volunteers who supported older people to 'get back out after COVID' and connect or reconnect with social activities of their choice. The peer volunteers were matched with participants and worked with them for up to six weeks to:

- Listen, discuss and understand the participant's needs, strengths, barriers and goals
- Establish goals for social connection
- Research and find options for activities, interests or support services
- Look at barriers to participation and how to overcome them
- Provide information, support and appropriate referrals
- Provide encouragement to build confidence and motivation
- Lend a helping hand to join in and get started with activities of their choice
- Provide digital support to search for options, and to connect with others.

I didn't even realise really that it was a helper/helped type of thing, there was that personal thing and the sharing, and Lai Woon was fabulous.
(Marg, Client)

While this project was in response to social isolation resulting from COVID-19 and we heard participant's unique stories, thoughts and goals for social connection, we also heard about other barriers to leading a full and engaged life within a community including; a lack of suitable transport, low digital literacy and just 'needing a bit of encouragement'.

Participant's stories of resilience and connecting or reconnecting, along with hints, tips and encouragement for others are shared through the *Voices On Ageing* podcast series produced by COTA SA and Narrative Media. We hope this series of six episodes presented by COTA SA's Chief Executive, Jane Mussared, and featuring interviews with podcast producer Amelia Veale inspires all older people to connect with others, find and join in with what brings satisfaction, joy and improved wellbeing.

I am indebted to COTA. I am very grateful for this service. Anna has been very helpful, especially at finding local things.
(Charles, Client)

12
Months




17
Peer
Volunteers



32
older people
participated




More than 50 enquiries or expression of interest for support




70%
Felt more able to manage physical health and wellbeing since using this service[^]



93%
Were connected with services and supports*



100%
Said the service was delivered in a culturally appropriate way and they felt welcomed, safe, listened to, understood and respected*



93%
Would recommend this service to family and friends who needed it*



*of 28 survey respondents ^of 27 respondents

MARG

Marg had a career as an academic and retired early after developing mild cognitive decline. Marg feared the future and withdrew from the world, spending time sitting in her recliner at home feeling depressed and anxious. She was looking for things to help and had joined a Strength for Life class and started seeing a counsellor. It was at this time she engaged with COTA Social Connections.

"Lai Woon (peer volunteer) was fabulous, she brought me leaflets and told me stories and not only that but she actually listened to my story, she came up with suggestions a silly joke about something stupid and all of the sort of warm caring things that I didn't really know I needed."

"...she helped me clarify what I needed and made me look around and wake up and do my homework and then to get up and out there and find the help I needed."

"She helped me identify some groups and services that could be of help so I could develop the skills and abilities that I needed."

"I think without her I may still be in the recliner or maybe lying down more comfortably still."



BRYAN

Bryan had ongoing health issues for many years. He and his wife Marlene had a small circle of friends but during this time most of them moved or passed away.

"I was very very low. I found I would just lie down, look at the four walls and try to fathom out some solutions but I never seemed to come up with it."

"We spotted a leaflet for COTA and I thought oh I'll ring up, and they sent down Lizzie and she was very good and she found out what my interests were and came back with some activities."

"I certainly wasn't confident before I found that leaflet, and Lizzie was so friendly. I was inspired. Before I was morbid and that was a turning point just by picking up that leaflet."

Lizzie gave digital training on how to use the computer to search for local activities and supports. "The computer was a great help."

"If you're not out and about experiencing things you just clam up. Now we go on walks every day either down by the beach, boardwalk or the river and my fitness is better. I am much happier than what I was. I would liked to have come forward with the solutions myself but I just couldn't, I needed an electric spark and that leaflet did the trick."



BARBARA

Barbara's husband had passed away and she found she was spending a lot of time at home alone and had not re-engaged with activities and social events.

"I saw this ad in the paper for COTA one day and I thought well I'll give it a go, and it really was worthwhile. They sent me out a wonderful person called Marjorie."

"She encouraged me and said I should really be looking at doing something and from that she did give me confidence."

"I feel much happier, I feel happier in the home. I look forward to going out and meeting people. Sometimes you feel you need to be needed."

"If I didn't (take steps to make connections) I wouldn't have anything to live for, would I?"

"It has it has made a big difference. Thank goodness for that ad I saw in the paper."



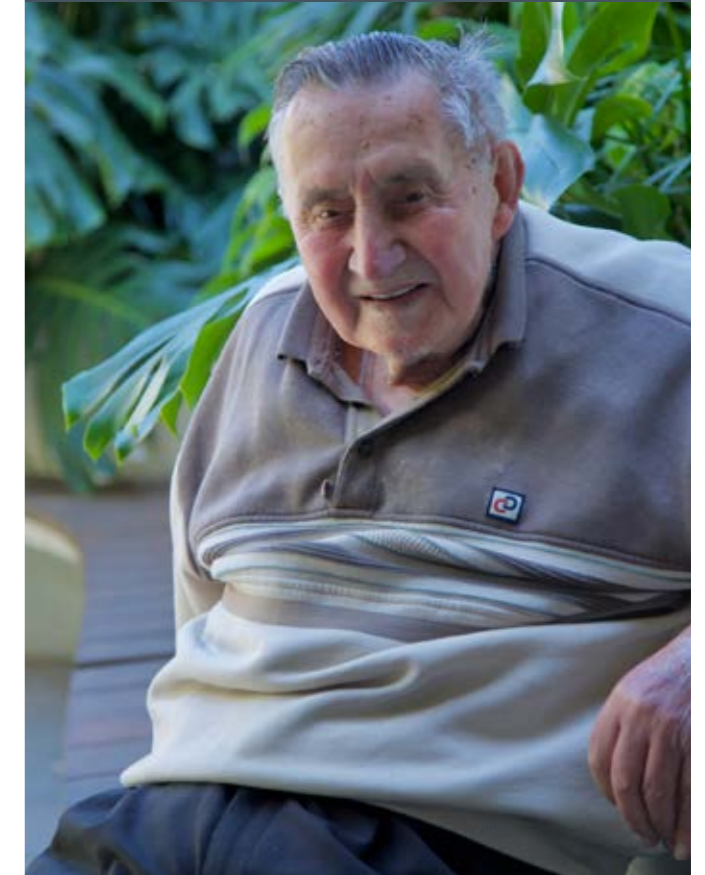
COLIN

Colin appreciates the companionship in his Retirement Village and was involved in organising social events and regular chats with people. On his mobility scooter, he also goes to the shops three times a week where he talks to people in the coffee shop. These activities have been disrupted by COVID.

Peer Volunteer Anna explored local options with Colin and he joined a social group called, Bunch of Blokes, importantly this includes transport for Colin to attend.

"We went out there a week ago, we sat down to a lunch in Osmond house. We enjoyed that one very much, they supplied the taxi and supplied food when we get up there, and there is a good sense of camaraderie when you get in there."

"I have joined a group up here just north of Adelaide. I found 13 men there... it is called Bunch of Blokes."



SANDRA

COVID-19 prompted Sandra and her husband to move back to Adelaide to be near family. Sandra retired and found herself isolated in an area she did not know or have friends in.

"The main thing for me was the isolation... it is very easy to become isolated."

COTA Social Connections provided Sandra with several opportunities to pursue in her local area and she is now volunteering with the COTA Visitors program visiting with an older woman who lives in her local area weekly, volunteering for and attending Strength for Life, and has joined a Country Women's Association group.

"For me socializing, enjoying other people's company, laughing, smiling and sharing experiences are all such positive inputs to ones' mental health."

"The notion of having those outside connections was really important to me, also not just the personal connections but connecting with the community as well."



BONNIE

Bonnie said that she is lonely and down. Her health and mobility have suffered over the last few years, she rarely leaves the house and finds taxi drivers are annoyed with her short trips to the local shops. Many of Bonnie's family and closest friends have died in the last few years. She receives some support through the Commonwealth Home Support Program and recently stopped running bingo in the retirement village because of COVID.

Bonnie is now visited in her home every fortnight by a volunteer COTA Visitor for coffee and a chat.

"Jemy and I sit down and talk, we talk a little bit of her country and I tell her about my country and she brings me these dates from her country every time and her mother makes coffee. She says I love coming here you make me laugh."

Bonnie was supported by COTA SA's Aged Care Navigator for a reassessment to receive a Home Care Package.

"...she was wonderful, she said that they would do gardening, housework and take me shopping. She actually rang up aged care, I had to give her permission to find out all my details and he told her that I would get the aged care package within 4-5 weeks, so I am waiting to hear from that."



COTA SA also convened a Social Connections Community of Practice throughout the project and thanks the following organisations for their valuable input.

Contact these participating organisations to find out more about how to connect with your community;

- ACH Social Links Program
- Community Centres SA, Loneliness Warriors Project
- COTA SA, COTA Visitors program
- ECH Community Connect and Community Led Connections programs
- Meals on Wheels, Social Connections Project
- Office for Ageing Well
- Simple Healthcare Solutions
- Sonder, COVID and Your Wellbeing project
- UNIITY
- Uniting Communities, Overcoming Loneliness Project
- Unley Council, Active Ageing
- Volunteering SA NT
- Wellbeing SA
- Woodcroft Medical Clinic

COTA SA continues to support older people to connect with others and with further funding can build on this successful project to provide peer volunteer 'connectors' - the vital link between older people wanting to improve their wellbeing, and the social activities, supports and services that suit them.

We thank the Adelaide Primary Health Network for their support of this project. If you are an older person who feels lonely, isolated or like you would benefit from 'getting back out there' a great starting point is always to speak with your General Practitioner.





The Plug-in.



Strength for Life



COTA SA

Level 1, 85 Hutt Street, Adelaide, SA 5000

PO BOX 7042, Hutt Street SA 5000

P: 08 8232 0422 | **Free Call:** 1800 182 324

E: cotasa@cotasa.org.au

www.cotasa.org.au

