

Brief Report

'I come for the friendship': Why social eating matters

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Objectives: To explore an innovative social eating programme model for older Tasmanians, Eating with Friends (EWF), from the perspectives of its participants, to establish how successfully it is meeting the organisational aims of strengthening community, reducing social isolation and enhancing mental well-being.

Methods: Focus groups and in-depth interviews, together with brief individual questionnaires, were undertaken with participants in four EWF groups: two urban and two rural, and with two well-established and two recently established groups.

Results: The study found that EWF was meeting the social eating needs of its participants, doing so through nurturing a sense of community.

Conclusion: The flexible model used by EWF was key to its success in achieving its aims. This allowed individual groups to evolve in ways which fitted the needs and aspirations of participants. While participants enjoyed their meals, the social environment and meal settings were determining factors for ongoing participation in EWF.

Key words: congregate meal, older people, service for older people, social eating, social engagement.

Introduction

Many community-dwelling older adults eat their meals alone or experience social isolation, which are well-established risk factors for undernutrition in this age group [1–3]. In response, some governments and community organisations offer congregate or community meals, which generally provide 'nourishing meals in a social environment' to older adults ([4]). However, there are very few published studies of congregate meals, and the majority of these focus on nutrition risk [5–8], nutrition education [9] or food safety [10], with only a few of studies exploring participants' experiences [11,12].

Eating with Friends (EWF) is a service model for which the statewide coordination has been funded through the former Home and Community Care (HACC) Program. It brings together older people at risk of social isolation for regular social contact and a nutritious meal. EWF has been operating in Tasmania for 15 years, and has grown from one

suburban group to more than 30 groups operating across the State. While EWF had undergone two evaluations, a study had not yet sought participants' perspectives on the value of EWF [13,14].

The core values of EWF are:

Providing low cost and nutritional meals in an inclusive and welcoming setting.

- Increasing opportunities for older people to reduce social isolation and develop friendships through social eating experiences.
- Increasing the capacity of communities to respond to needs of isolated older people.
- Increasing opportunities for community volunteers to develop increased skills, self-confidence and sense of community [15].

The project explored the first three of these core values from the perspectives of the participants, rather than those of volunteers and group co-ordinators [16].

Method

Following approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network, fieldwork was conducted in July–December 2012. A sample of four EWF groups was identified by the research team and the EWF coordinator as representative of the diversity of EWF groups. It included two urban and two rural groups, two newly established and two longer-term groups, groups in the various regions of the state, and groups which met in a variety of settings: a rural school, a community club, an aged care facility and a community health centre.

Participants were self-selected, in that they were present on the day of data collection and volunteered through formal, written consent to take part in one or more:

- focus groups conducted in the four EWF settings;
- follow-up one-on-one interviews; and
- a short demographic questionnaire.

The focus groups and interviews explored significance to its members and their perceptions of the group's role in community. These sessions were digitally recorded and later transcribed. Conducting an inductive thematic analysis of this qualitative data allowed themes to emerge from the data, which were then assigned descriptive or analytical codes and discussed with the EWF Research Steering Committee [17]. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analysed in Excel to generate descriptive statistics.

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Results

The study was a snapshot of attendees on the day of their group's luncheon. In total, 41 of 56 luncheon attendees completed the questionnaire and took part in a focus group; nine of these were interviewed afterwards, either in person or by phone. Participation rates varied from 82% of a newer group (14 of 17) to 64% of a well-established group (7 of 11). Some of those who declined to participate cited 'interview fatigue' from other evaluation processes, while others appeared to be focused on socialising and eating.

The number of women attending all groups, and participating in the study, was higher than that for men (varying from 64 to 82%). From the questionnaire, some of the key characteristics of the groups were identified:

- In all groups, a significant majority was born in Australia (70 to 90%).
- There was significant variation across the groups of those who lived alone (86, 60, 38 and 20%).
- Opportunities for perceived alternative social eating opportunities also varied, with urban group participants identifying a greater potential for alternative or additional social eating events.

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data identified five key themes: 'locality', 'social relationships and connections', 'food and meals', 'barriers to access' and 'sense of belonging'.

Regarding locality, participants usually identified ease of access and convenience as key factors. 'I'm local' and 'It's close by and easy to get to' were repeated comments. However, the physical and social setting for the group meals was appreciated:

I love this set-up.
It's the atmosphere.
I like how it is set up ... smaller tables help [us] to interact.

However, it was social relationships and connections that participants valued most. Responses were peppered with comments relating to companionship, friendship, acceptance and social interaction. Powerful examples included:

It breaks the monotony of being home all the time by yourself.
I come for the friendship.
You meet people and talk to people that you've never met before, so that's why I go.
Everyone mixes, everyone is welcome.
The people here are absolutely kind and thoughtful, everybody is friendly.

In relation to food and meals, the chance to eat different meals and relief from cooking for one's self were major considerations. Positive comments came from all groups in relation to the meals, such as:

I cook my own meals so it's nice to have a meal out.
The food is always different ... it would cost a fortune if you had it at a restaurant.

For a significant number of the participants, EWF filled a major gap where opportunities for accessible and affordable social eating were limited, both in urban and rural settings. For some, EWF provided a setting which was preferable to a day centre model (I'm too young to come to the day centres!); for others, there were no other options:

Not a lot else in the area to make friends ... social things.
Not a lot of ways to make friends elsewhere in the area.

Transport, or lack of it, was the key barrier to access in both urban and rural settings. Some groups had access to community transport, others had members who provided transport to group members and some individuals used taxis. Public transport was seen as unsuitable for those constrained by frailty or ill health:

Some couldn't come here any other way, we need the community bus.
The main drawback to people getting to the lunches is they can't afford taxis twice a month and they don't drive any more.

Participants expressed a strong sense of belonging, and felt the groups gave them a sense of place and inclusion:

It's the inclusion feeling ... a community within a community.

This sense of belonging had led participants to feel a significant level of identification with their EWF group and its operation. Many participants had helped to shape groups, which was reflected in their diversity. Variations included:

- Venue (as noted earlier – aged care facility, community health centre, school, community facility).
- Overall culture of the group.
- Timing of luncheons (weekday or weekend).
- Source of meals (catered externally, provided by volunteers, a school or facility).
- Wine was an option in one group.
- Some meals were three courses, others two.

Participants, when asked to explore the potential of either changing the way in which their group operated, or changing their group entirely, were very reluctant to consider change:

They have to be good, or I would have stopped going, that's the best recommendation I can give them.

Conclusion

The project explored whether EWF was addressing the social eating needs of older Tasmanians from the perspective of its participants. The findings demonstrate qualified agreement that groups met the social eating needs of the participants in the groups studied. The study found that the EWF model had, within its quite simple premise of providing opportunities for older people to share a meal and socialise, sufficient flexibility for groups to evolve to fit the particular needs and aspirations of their members. The four studied groups are as notable for their individuality as for what they share. They take the shape of their members and therefore suit those members. The question that cannot be answered by our study data is to what extent there are older people in these communities for whom these groups do not meet their needs or who feel excluded by them.

The key challenge for the groups, as indicated by the participants, was suitable, affordable transport for those without their own motor vehicle. Another emerging issue for congregate meal programmes is the new funding arrangements and referral processes of the Commonwealth Home Support Programme and My Aged Care. Future studies might investigate the value of community transport and innovative administrative arrangements for ensuring the ongoing viability of social eating programmes.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

Key Points

- Eating with Friends (EWF) is meeting the needs of its current participants in relation to social inclusion through social eating in both rural and urban settings.
- Individual EWF groups operate flexibly within the programme guidelines, effectively enabling participants to shape the group and its activities, leading to a diversity of groups, settings, meals and gender dynamics.
- The major challenge for participants is in relation to transport and access, particularly where no community transport options are available.

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