Eating with friends
Still creating healthier lives 16 years on

2016
Eating With Friends is a Tasmania wide social eating program that brings people together to enjoy a meal, make new friends and develop social connections. It is about reducing social isolation, improving wellbeing and building community capacity.

Eating With Friends Project Officer
The Eating With Friends project is supported by funding from both State and Federal governments.
The strength of a community lies in the strength of the connections that we have with each other.

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WHERE ARE EATING WITH FRIENDS GROUPS?

There are currently 36 eating with friends groups in Tasmania.
**WHAT IS EATING WITH FRIENDS?**

*Eating With Friends* aims to address the issues of social isolation and poor nutrition among older people by working with communities and volunteer groups to provide regular group meals.

*Eating With Friends* is a Tasmania wide social eating program. EWF is about bringing people together for a nutritious meal and making new friends. It is about reducing social isolation, improving wellbeing and building community capacity. It’s about working with communities and volunteer groups to organise and run regular group meals.

There is no fixed format on how an EWF group should be run. EWF groups have a community development focus, with groups being run by a local community for their community, with each addressing their own needs, utilising available resources, partnerships and strengths.

EWF groups have been operating since 2000. The social eating concept grew out of concern from Meals on Wheels volunteers that so many older people were eating alone. A working party was formed, made up of community workers and volunteers, to look at ways to bring socially isolated older people together to share a meal and to enjoy the company of others. A pilot group was set up in 2000 in West Moonah. That original group still operates, with a total of 36 EWF groups currently being run by different community groups and organisations around the state.

Individual groups operate on a cost recovery basis, and are driven by volunteers and community partnerships. Groups do not receive funding from external sources.

The *Eating With Friends* groups practice and promote 7 core values. These values are:

1. **Provide low cost, varied and nutritious meals.**
2. **Encourage a culture of inclusiveness, where everybody is welcome to attend.**
3. **Target interested people who may have limited opportunities to socialise.**
4. **Draw upon and use, where able, local community resources.** For example: community transport, local venues, funding opportunities, etc.
Provide an opportunity for community members to participate and be involved in the running of the group and meal preparation in a volunteer capacity.

Respond to the needs of the local community.

Ensure appropriate access is provided where needed. For example: transport, disabled access to venues, meals for specific nutrition needs such as modified texture.

**Eating With Friends** brings people together to enjoy a meal, make new friends and develop social connections. It provides opportunities for volunteers to share their skills and make a difference in their community.

Since its inception in 2000, EWF has become a community driven initiative with a number of groups now operating throughout Tasmania. There are a variety of organisations involved in running the groups including:

- Community groups
- Schools
- Churches
- Neighbourhood Houses
- CALD communities
- Health centres

Volunteers and workers from these organisations plan and run the EWF group’s activities.

A volunteer Steering Committee has been active since the early days of EWF. There is a part-time EWF Project Coordinator employed to assist and support new and existing EWF groups and provide advice, support and resources. This position has been supported by funding from both State and Federal Governments since 2008, and is auspiced by Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania.

**Eating With Friends** served an estimated 18,347 meals this year.
Some identified outcomes from research in 2007 include:

- Increased communication skills of group members.
- In groups where young people support EWF groups, older people are more accepting of young people and vice versa.
- Volunteers get to use their skills.
- Participants look out for each other and new friendships are formed.
- Greater connections with community organisations are created.
- Volunteers gain a sense of fulfillment and well-being.

The social aspects of meal times have been identified as an integral part of the eating process. Eating as a social activity is a way of connecting and interacting with other people. Social isolation, which is the lived experience of many older people, is identified as a factor that interferes with their ability to eat well. Individuals may lose interest in preparing or eating regular meals alone. The social experience around meal times makes a big difference to appetites.

In the World Health Organisation’s report Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts (2003) social engagement is recognised as a strong health determinant: “friendship, good social relations and strong supportive networks improve health ... social support helps give people the emotional and practical resources they need. Belonging to a social network makes people feel cared for, loved, esteemed and valued. This belonging has a powerful protective effect on health.”

Research conducted by the University Department of Rural Health (UDRH) at the University of Tasmania, entitled Healthy Eating for Healthy Ageing in Rural Tasmania (2007), explored challenges facing older rural people in staying socially connected. The study looked at current social eating models, including Eating With Friends groups, and the results confirm the benefits of getting people together to share meals in a social setting.
You can sit next to a total stranger and you end up chatting away like you’ve known them all your life.
Research participants drew a distinction between food and eating. Food is food, whereas eating involves others – it implies company and some kind of social interaction.

Participants clearly identified that eating with others was much more enjoyable than eating alone, and *Eating With Friends* provided them with invaluable social interaction and, almost as an aside, the group also happened to provide a meal. It was the access to other people and the anticipation of time shared that enhanced the eating experience.

People repeatedly gave social explanations for their use of *Eating With Friends* services … *it’s a good way to meet people … for the company … to chat to people and find out what they are doing … just to hear lots of voices.*

While eating in company, older people reported that they eat more broadly and more varied foods than they would have at home alone, thereby improving their nutritional intake. The research indicates that any meal program needs to recognise the social aspect of meals as essential – which is what *Eating With Friends* does.

Some identified outcomes from the *Eating With Friends Project Evaluation*, conducted by Community Focus in 2008 are: people’s involvement lead to a more positive outlook and increased motivation to eat regular and varied meals; friendships developed and social contacts...
There is far more to food than its physical benefits of nutrition and health. With whom we eat, when we eat, where we eat, what we eat and under what conditions we eat ... are all socially very significant. If logic and nutrition were the only concerns, we would all eat worms.

I like to be able to help people and it makes me feel good to see people being happy. Volunteering is something I can do to contribute to my community.
HOW DOES EATING WITH FRIENDS HAPPEN?

Eating With Friends relies on volunteers – it is their energy and enthusiasm which will ensure the success of an EWF group.

Volunteering with an EWF group creates involvement in the local community, while addressing the social needs of community members; volunteering benefits both the community and volunteer by building connections between people; volunteering respects the rights, dignity and culture of others and promotes equality and acceptance in the community.

It feels really good to be able to do something that makes a difference in someone’s life, helping others.

I haven’t got any family of my own, so helping others who may be lonely gives me a lot of satisfaction.

You get a real buzz out of helping someone else and changing their life.

It’s a nice way to bring people together.

So many people have said it’s made a world of difference to them.

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We estimate that there were **205 VOLUNTEERS** involved this year.

**Eating With Friends** volunteers contributed an estimated **10,374 HOURS** this year.

**NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS**

My involvement with Eating With Friends commenced 10 years ago when Jackie Dermody (then the Coordinator of Meals on Wheels South) and Dorothy McCartney (Community Nutrition Unit) asked me to join a reference group. The reference group’s role was to oversee a research and pilot project called Eating With Friends. Lorraine Mars, the project officer, interviewed older people in the West Moonah area to investigate the correlation between social isolation and nutritional health. During these interviews Lorraine explored what model of shared meals people would prefer to participate in. The verdict was that most people wanted group meals held at a community facility.

The West Moonah Community House and their volunteer program agreed to trial a group meal catered by volunteers and coordinated by Jackie Dermody. The trial was a success and the West Moonah Eating With Friends group was born.

A committee was formed with state, commonwealth, local government and community representatives to look at how the Eating With Friends project could be continued and expanded once the initial one-off grant had expired. At the first meeting of this committee we concluded that Eating With Friends groups could be run with support from volunteers, local agencies, businesses and our committee and would not be reliant on external funding. To support this, an action kit was developed to help establish and run groups. We then decided to run a forum, to which we hoped to maybe get 40 people together with agreement to start 1-2 new groups. Well, our expectations were exceeded with over 100 people attending and 5 groups agreeing to set-up Eating With Friends clubs.

From that moment Eating With Friends has gathered enormous momentum and support. The concept works because it is not an imposed program but rather allows communities to choose how the model will work for them, and the basic principles of bringing people together to share food and friendships is understood and appreciated by everyone.
Coming to this Eating With Friends group means:
– a greater feeling of belonging
– it’s an outing so that I can meet other people. Living alone isn’t fun.
– interacting with other people and meeting new friends. We have so much fun and laughter. I love coming here
– good food, good company, good conversation
It’s not only what you eat, it’s not only the fun that you have, it’s what you are doing with your heart that makes you really happy!
HOW IMPORTANT IS EATING WITH FRIENDS?

Dorothy McCartney, 2010
Population Health, Department of Health and Human Services

I have really fond memories of Eating With Friends and am proud that I was there at the beginning. Here is my story.

I was employed at the Community Nutrition Unit as a community dietician and was directed to do some work around nutrition and the "elderly". As part of this I started meeting with Jackie Dermody, who at the time was CEO of Meals on Wheels, (MOW). At one of our very informal meetings we started to discuss that one of the issues with her clients was that they were socially isolated. They often commented that although they really appreciated getting Meals on Wheels, they always had to eat alone.

Jackie and I decided that if we could get some money, maybe we could employ a project officer to do some background research and pilot various models where MOW clients could eat together. We got funding through the Community Support Levy in 2001 and employed Lorraine Mars as the project officer. She developed a survey and interviewed MOW clients and came up with a model that was piloted. The Steering Committee then got together, pooled our areas of expertise and developed an Eating With Friends Action Kit. As they say, the rest is history.

The program was one of the best and most successful I have worked on and I often think about what made it successful.

I think that the name “Eating With Friends” helped – people immediately knew what the program was about. As well, there was flexibility for community groups and schools to adapt it to their needs so it was adopted by different groups. Through the years, many people have been involved to contribute to this valuable program – it is truly a program that brings people together.
HOW IMPORTANT IS EATING WITH FRIENDS?

The project was based upon the principles of: promoting the active participation of the older people who were involved in the design of the shared meal; mobilising community resources available, including the recruitment of volunteers, transport services and venues; be cost effective and sustainable into the future.

Proposed benefits of the project: for the older people we hoped that friendships would develop and that social contact would begin to happen outside the arranged meal times; their involvement would lead to a more positive outlook and increased motivation to eat regular and varied meals; for volunteers, that their involvement would lead to increased skills and self confidence; that carers might benefit from having a well-deserved break; for referring agencies, that the involvement of their clients would support the work they were already achieving; for families, that these outings would lessen the pressure of their parent’s loneliness.

When the participants of the survey were asked what they missed most about meals with other people, they cited company, followed by variety of food, conversation, meeting new people, not having to cook for themselves and change of scenery.

In 2000 I went into people’s homes – they (survey participants) were more than happy to talk to me, have a chat and a cup of tea. The model I came up with was simplistic but it didn’t matter – it was just about getting them out and having a meal. So many said it put some hope back in their lives and gave them something to look forward to – that they were going to come out and meet other people and get dressed up. It was basically about sitting together to share a meal and for them (participants) to make new friends.

That’s what I loved about the pilot project – it was very easy to sell within the community and we had the local schools coming on board. I love it when things spin off into other layers of community involvement. I think that is why it worked so well – it was a really flexible model with no hard and fast rules. There was a lot of interest –
people looked at how they could take it back to their communities. It’s so nice to know it’s still going.

It required quite a bit of hard work from volunteers. We did a lot of roasts for Sunday lunch. It was an honour for me, it was a privilege to be involved. It was such a committed committee, with such enthusiasm. It was a really good team effort and if anything was going to succeed, Eating With Friends was going to. It was like little mushrooms that were going to spread everywhere. It’s such a simple idea people can take different things from it and run with it.

_The model I came up with was simplistic but it didn’t matter – it was just about getting them out and having a meal._
HOW IMPORTANT IS EATING WITH FRIENDS?

Eating With Friends has such a wonderful atmosphere. I love the constant chatter and the happy vibe that fills the room. I love the way people arrive early so that they can save their favourite seats for their friends. One of the best things is how people arrange their calendar around EWF - they would not miss it for the world. The pick-up trips are just wonderful – to have a car full of excited, chatting, laughing 80+ year olds is something to be experienced.

Lexia, Derwent Valley

Travelling around different venues in Dorset has been a great way for the people who attend Eating With Friends to reminisce and talk about where they grew up, started work and met their first love. One of the venues, a pub, was where one woman got her first job 60 years ago.

Vicki, Dorset House

As we all know “food brings people together”. During one of our meetings a person who does not cook much anymore, had beautiful memories of some dishes and wondered if they can be available anywhere? With the participation of those around the table we got hold of the recipe and cooked the marvellous dish. Let me tell you, we made her day! So Eating With Friends is definitely our monthly ‘special event’.

Elena, Deloraine House
We enjoy Eating With Friends because we get to meet lovely older people, having great conversations with them and getting to cook amazing food for them. We know they really appreciate the time and effort we put into it. Also the practice is great fun. We just love Eating With Friends and we are so happy to have it at our school.
CONTRIBUTORS TO THE SUSTAINABILITY OF EATING WITH FRIENDS

- Commonwealth Home Support Program
- Home and Community Care Program (HACC)
- Glenorchy City Council
- Eat Well Tasmania
- Farmers and Graziers Association
- Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania
- Dept of Veteran Affairs
- DHHS Community Nutrition Unit
- Community Support Levy
- Multicultural Tasmania
- West Moonah Volunteer Program
- Meals On Wheels Association
- Jackie Dermody
- Dorothy McCartney
- Julie Williams
- Tracey Tasker
- Kacey Rubie
- Karen Mackenzie
- Belinda Bradford
- Miriam Herzfeld
- Nenita Orsino
- Kim Lethbridge
- John Hooper
- Christine Nichols
- Rebecca Essex
- Wendy Simmons
- Suzanne Wellesley
- Anne Mullavey
- Grace Seed
- Jenny Banasik
- Cath McFaul
- Wes Carpenter
- Lorraine Mars
- Stella Rodriguez
- Louise Manka
- Kim Boyer
- Alexandra King
- Judy Smith
- Lexia Brown
- Karen Austen

... and numerous other wonderful volunteers, community groups and organisations.

Thank you.
One of the delights of life is eating with friends, second to that is talking about eating. And, for an unsurpassed double whammy, there is talking about eating while you are eating with friends.

Laurie Colwin Home Cooking: A Writer in the Kitchen Harper Collins 1987