

SOCIAL CONNECTION TOOL GUIDE

for Residential Aged Care



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We pay our respects to the traditional custodians of the lands on which we live and work, and acknowledge their Elders, past and present.

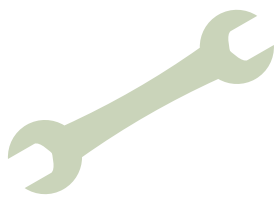
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that this document may contain images of deceased people.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the ***Social Connection Tool Guide*** is to assist you in getting the most out of using the assessment tool with residents.

The guide describes the Tool and what it's aiming to achieve. It talks about the importance of finding out about people's preferences for their social connection, to support their health and wellbeing. The guide gives suggestions about suitable places and situations for using the Tool. This includes discussion of how to use the Tool safely with residents and what information you should be aiming to collect about a resident's social connections.

The Social Connection Tool is one part of a ***Social Connection Toolkit*** with three components.



A Tool

A conversational-style question set, to support a comfortable and standardised way for aged care staff to discuss social connection with residents. The purpose of the Tool is for residents to share information about what they want from their social connections. It also enables staff to find out about residents' social connection wants and needs to inform personalised care planning.



A guide

The guide, (this document) to using the Social Connection Tool with residents. The guide describes what the Social Connection Tool is, why social connection is important for overall health and wellbeing, how to use the Tool safely with residents and where and when to use the Tool to get the best results.



E-learning modules

E-learning modules for aged care staff to learn some useful and evidence-based information about social connection. Five short modules introduce ideas and terms about social connection and define what social connection is and describe how it affects residents' health and wellbeing. The e-learning modules can be found here: [The Social Connection E-learning modules](#)

The Social Connection Tool aims to:



Enable staff to have consistent and meaningful discussions with residents about what they want and need for their social connectedness.



Optimise rapport between residents and aged care staff and give agency and voice to residents on a key issue that will impact their quality of life and wellbeing outcomes.



Support older peoples' social and emotional wellbeing in residential aged care, by using the information collected with the Tool to inform person-centred care planning and social programming.

Social Connection Tool: WHAT is it?

The Social Connection Tool is an assessment tool that tries to use day-to-day conversational language and tone to engage older people to talk about a potentially quite personal topic - their social connectedness.

The Tool uses positive language to encourage people to think about the future by building on their social connections, including the activities that they enjoy doing and the places that they feel comfortable spending time with others.

The Tool is strength-based and focuses on existing connections and contacts with others that residents may already have or seek to re-establish. Residents might have connections with people in the local community, organisations or aged care staff that are useful to know about.

The Tool seeks to identify who and what activities involving connection are important to each individual resident. It is also about understanding any priorities or gaps an older person may have in their social connections. Knowing this information can help to build upon social connection assets that residents have and help to inform personalised care planning.

This Tool can also assist aged care providers to support individuals moving into an aged care facility for the first time. In this situation, it can help to capture how new residents like to connect with others and help to identify important connections or activities that people would like to have in their lives in their new home.

The Social Connection Tool has been co-designed with residents and staff from Uniting NSW.ACT and Salvation Army Aged Care. It is informed by peer-reviewed research evidence and theory about people's social connection.

The Social Connection Tool:

- Consists of 11 questions co-designed with older people and aged care staff to collect information about their social connections.
- Asks who residents connect with and how often they are in contact, what types of activities they enjoy doing with others and how they can be supported to meet new people in the facility and in the local community.
- Has open and exploratory questions to encourage a conversation that focuses on residents as individuals with different wants and needs.
- Is strength-based as it aims to build on resident's existing social connections, hobbies, and interests.
- Can be used at admission and afterwards to inform person-centred care planning.
- Is underpinned by research evidence about the social connection that people need in order to maintain their health and wellbeing.

WHY do we need to talk about social connection?

Social isolation and loneliness for older people in residential aged care is a recognised challenge, internationally. In 2021, The World Health Organisation (WHO) identified that living in a residential aged care facility is a top risk factor for experiencing social isolation and loneliness. A 2020 systematic review of research literature found that, globally, around 61% of older people living in care homes may be moderately lonely and around 35% may be severely lonely.

The Australian Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (2021) noted that older people can sometimes experience disconnected and isolated environments within Australian residential aged care. It said that the “current system does not proactively support social and emotional wellbeing”.

Social isolation and loneliness have detrimental effects on people’s physical and mental health, with some evidence suggesting that lacking social connection carries a risk that is comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Social isolation and loneliness have effects on our mental health and are linked with increased levels of anxiety, depression, cognitive decline, and progression of memory loss issues such as Alzheimer’s disease.

Focusing on people’s social connection rather than focusing on loneliness takes a more positive, strength-based approach to thinking about social contact. Taking a strengths-based focus emphasises what is going on in peoples’ lives that is positive, such as understanding their relationships with family, friends and acquaintances, places they feel drawn to, hobbies, and interests, indeed a range of things that make people feel they belong and are valued.

Having healthy social connection is thus very important for older people’s physical health and mental wellbeing and is a key contributor to successful ageing and quality of life. It is important to prioritise residents’ social and emotional wellbeing, as well as physical health, when providing quality care.



“ I enjoyed the company and time spent talking.”

Maggie enjoyed being asked the questions in the Social Connection Tool, she felt it was helpful for her to articulate all the things that were going on in her life.

Social Connection Tool: HOW to use it

1

Choose a calm and quiet environment to use the Social Connection Tool with the resident. This might be sitting in the garden, having a cup of tea in the lounge room, or in a resident's room if you are invited. It should be somewhere both the resident and you feel is relaxed and private.

2

Check in with the emotional state of the resident (and yourself) before engaging with using the Tool. Are you and the resident, calm and comfortable? Ask the resident if they feel alright, emotionally, to talk about their social connectedness and remember to ask them for permission to use the Tool with them prior to getting started.

3

Read the Duty of Care statement out loud to the resident before using the Tool. While doing this, be aware of the resident's body language. If, at any time, they look uncomfortable whilst using the Tool, ask them if they would like to stop. They can complete the questions at another time, or not at all. If a resident appears to exhibit signs of distress while engaging with the Social Connection Tool, report this to the manager on shift or the Lifestyle Coordinator. Let the resident know that there are counselling services available and if needed, Lifeline Australia for crisis support on **13 11 14**.

4

Be sure to set realistic expectations with residents about how they might be supported to maintain their social connectedness, strengthen, or build new social connections. You don't want to over-promise or raise hopes about actions that might be taken if this is not realistic given time and resources. Also remember that, at this early stage, you are just trying to learn more about the resident as a person and their individual wants and needs for social connection. The information you collect will be used by the Lifestyle Coordinator for future care planning.



“ If residents have any limitations e.g., hearing or leg problems, you learn how much it affects them in their everyday life and how certain social interactions are heavily influenced by this.”

Staff member Lee sits with Thu and uses the tool, he learns that she has difficulties having conversations with people when there is a lot of background noise, due to her hearing aid. This means that she tends to avoid group activities taking place in the facility and prefers connecting one-on-one.

Duty of Care statement

The Australian Department of Health and Aged Care describe ‘duty of care’ as taking responsible measures to protect, or at least not cause foreseeable harm to another person. Within modern thinking about aged care, the idea of duty of care is also about providing a high standard of care that meets an individual person’s assessed needs and listening to and facilitating their consumer dignity and choice. The Social Connection Tool aims to stimulate and facilitate conversations to capture what is most important to older people, regarding their social connections and connection to their local community.

The Duty of Care statement is the short preamble before the questions in the Social Connection Tool. It is important to read the Duty of Care statement out loud to a resident before asking the questions in the Tool. People should know that the assessment tool can be completed at any time or not at all. They should be feeling comfortable, calm and in a relaxed emotional state.

This is important because talking about social connection may bring up upsetting thoughts or feelings for some residents although that is not the intention. When you have read out the Duty of Care statement to the resident, it provides them with an opportunity to check-in with themselves and determine how they are feeling at the time. Social connection could be a sensitive topic, raising difficult emotions for some residents, such as grief or sadness when thinking about loved ones passed or activities that the older person is no longer able to participate in.

It is also important that you are feeling alright, so check in with yourself as well, before you begin to use the Tool. Do you feel calm and relaxed?

In the case that the questions in the Tool do bring up uncomfortable feelings for the resident, it is important to be aware of verbal or non-verbal cues indicating that the older person is uncomfortable or in distress. If you notice this, it is important to stop the conversation, and ask the person if they would like to:

1. continue using the Tool at another time or
2. continue with a support person present, or
3. complete the Tool with a different person e.g., Lifestyle Coordinator, Pastoral Care, a family member, or friend, or
4. prefer not to complete the Social Connection Tool questions.

Tips on implementing the Social Connection Tool:



The questions are designed to make people reflect and consider. So, make sure to give people enough time to think about their answers. It might take them a while to start talking or get to the point of what they really think or want, so it's important not to rush them. If they go off track, just gently remind them of the question.



Try not to re-word the questions unless you think that the resident does not understand. Give people time to respond or ask questions or for clarity.



Try to record what the residents say pretty much as they say it. Resist re-phrasing answers when recording them or shortening them, although in some cases this may be necessary if responses are lengthy. Be aware that this may take away from the meaning of what the resident was sharing with you and that it's important to try to capture answers in the voice of the resident for future care planning.



Record resident responses that mention people, contacts, activities, hobbies, interests, or rooms, places, and physical things that help people with feeling social connected. That is, for example, activities or places that involve interacting with other people or being around others. Other examples are environments where there might be people or comforting things and places, even if the resident doesn't directly interact with them. Examples of this might be sitting in the garden enjoying nature and the surroundings or in the lounge room when other residents and staff are there.

Tips on implementing the Social Connection Tool:



There is no time limit or recommended duration for completion of the Social Connection Tool. It is intended to stimulate conversations and assist residents to feel comfortable to tell you about what is most important to them. If a resident takes a while to answer each question, break the Tool up into individual questions and ask a couple of questions each day.



Allow and encourage residents to talk about activities, places, people both in the facility but also external to the facility – like in the community, a park, art gallery, or other place they talk about. Assist the resident to be a little creative if that seems appropriate.



Encourage residents to think broadly about social connection and not solely to focus on their current home situation. They might want to talk about things they've done in the past and there could be ideas within those recollections to stimulate thinking about future activities.



If you receive a negative or 'nothing' response, ask people 'why do you feel this way' or 'why is this so?'



Remember that some people prefer the company of animals, nature, or technology, like listening to podcasts or connecting with others via video calls or even some online forums, games or social media. People may also have very strong connections with their culture and faith. If mentioned include this information.

WHERE to use the Social Connection Tool

It is important to be aware of the environment in which you are using the Tool with residents. As the questions in the Social Connection Tool relate to peoples' personal connections, interests, and hobbies, make sure that the environment has enough privacy for the resident to feel comfortable to speak openly about these things.

Look around, are there other people within earshot? If so, ask the resident if they would like to sit somewhere else that is more private and away from others. When considering where to use the Tool it is also important to be aware of the background noise in the setting, is it difficult for you to hear each other?

Is there a TV blaring in the background or any other noises that could disturb your conversation? Factors such as privacy and noise can affect how comfortable residents feel to share this information with you. Choose a place that is both quiet and calm, to create a relaxed environment.



“I enjoyed being outside in the garden to do this, it can be done anywhere.”

Lyn enjoyed sitting in the garden and answering the questions in the Social Connection Tool. She found it relaxing listening to the birds and feeling the sun on her skin whilst chatting about her connections and the hobbies that she loves—such as gardening!

WHEN you should use the Social Connection Tool with residents

The Social Connection Tool should be used with residents within the first week that they arrive at the facility. It is important to give them a couple of days to settle in, but not to leave it too long. It's comforting for new residents to know that this information is being considered in their care plan and that they will be supported to maintain connections and activities that are important to them.

After this, the Tool should be used again periodically with residents once or twice a year as people's social connections, interests and hobbies change over time. Using the Tool to regularly update a person's care plan is also a good way to keep track of and measure social connection, e.g., have some new connections been made through the activities included in the resident's care plan?

It's important to be aware if a resident may have lost an important connection, so that they can receive support during this time and other close connections of theirs can be notified.

“I didn’t understand the purpose of it at the beginning and didn’t realise it would be so much about my personal social connections... But was good to say out loud what I do in terms of my social interactions.”

Peter found it helpful to answer the questions in the Tool and say out loud the things that he did socially during the week... He hadn't really thought about all the various ways that he enjoyed connecting with others before.



If you are interested in social connection, you might like to take a look at our short resource for community practitioners.

The Social Connection 101 handbook.

You can find it and other helpful resources at **www.social-connection.au**



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