

VOLUNTEER FACT SHEET:

Recognising signs of loneliness and social isolation in older people



Why this matters



Social connection is essential for health and wellbeing at every stage of life. As people age, life changes such as retirement, bereavement, declining health, reduced mobility, or changes in family circumstances can increase the risk of loneliness and social isolation.

Volunteers are often well placed to notice changes in a person's wellbeing and can play an important role in supporting connection and inclusion.



Understanding the difference

Social Isolation:

Social isolation occurs when a person has limited contact with family, friends, neighbours, or community activities.

Loneliness:

Loneliness is the feeling of being disconnected from others or lacking meaningful relationships.

A person can be socially connected but still feel lonely, while others may have limited social contact without experiencing loneliness.

Signs a person may be experiencing loneliness or isolation

Volunteers may notice that an older person:

Talks about being alone:

- Frequently mentions feeling lonely.
- Speaks about missing family, friends, or a partner.
- Expresses feeling forgotten or left out.

Has reduced social contact:

- Rarely receives visitors.
- Has limited contact with family or friends.
- Relies heavily on volunteer visits as their main social interaction.

Withdraws from activities:

- Stops attending community groups or events.
- Declines invitations to participate.
- Shows less interest in hobbies or activities they once enjoyed.



Experiences changes in mood:

- Appears sad, anxious, or withdrawn.
- Becomes less engaged in conversation.
- Shows reduced confidence or motivation.

Faces practical barriers:

- Has difficulty accessing transport.
- Experiences hearing or vision changes that affect communication.
- Has health or mobility challenges that limit participation.



What can volunteers do?

Volunteers are not expected to assess, diagnose, or solve loneliness. Instead volunteers can:

- Listen without judgement.
- Show genuine interest and empathy.
- Encourage participation in activities and community life.
- Share information about local opportunities where appropriate.
- Follow organisational procedures if they have concerns about a person's wellbeing.

Reflection questions

- What signs of isolation have I noticed?
- What barriers may be preventing participation?
- How can I support connection while respecting independence?
- What local opportunities could help this person stay engaged?



Key message

Loneliness and social isolation are not always obvious. Volunteers can make a significant difference simply by noticing changes, listening respectfully, and helping people stay connected to their community.

For more information regarding volunteering opportunities in Ballarat contact:

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The Ballarat Foundation acknowledges the Wadawurrung people, the traditional owners of the lands and waterways in our region. We recognise their diversity, resilience, and the ongoing place that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people hold in our communities. We pay our respects to the Elders, both past and present, and commit to working together in the spirit of mutual understanding, respect and reconciliation.

