

# Lifeline, Embrace Life through 'CHATS'

Lifeline Hobart has a long history of working with people in distress. Callers to our 13 11 14 service over many years have expressed their personal difficulties and life challenges. Some have lived experience of mental health challenges, a few have struggled with suicide or the effect of losing someone to suicide, but most have been challenged by relationship issues, drug and alcohol or loneliness and isolation; not feeling as they fit into the wider community.

Lifeline recognizes there is more to life than challenges. Having a place where people can feel connected, valued and just have fun, is an important part of our mental and emotional wellbeing. Recognising this Lifeline, Eight years ago, started a new program called Chats. The Chats program assists older people in building friendships, having fun and rediscovering the child within!

Overcoming the challenges many older people experience of feeling powerless and with little control of their lives can be difficult. Chats encourages participants to take active control of their social lives, supporting them in deciding where they want to go, who they want to go with and when they want to go. Chats is a HACC funded program which provides a link to friendships and social activity for older people who are living independently in the community and experiencing loneliness. The emphasis is on actively facilitating opportunities for the development of peer friendships and social networks. These are key factors in building resilience and self confidence and encouraging help seeking behaviors.

Having significantly grown over the past 3 years, Chats now supports over 130 people to be more engaged and have fun in their lives. Volunteers phone participants each week for a friendly conversation. The calls help address the emotional loneliness which can come from the absence of a close friend. Feedback from participants indicates that the desire to find varied topics for conversation has encouraged them to look beyond their feelings of loneliness and preoccupation with health issues. Evidence has shown that a complex network of different types of friendships might be the best protection against loneliness (Cattan et al, 2005). These regular and often very personal conversations aid the development of the communication skills which build relationships at a deeper level. The phone calls and a monthly newsletter link participants to a range of social activities.

Chats works in collaboration with a wide range of community groups and organisations which conduct cultural, creative, sporting and social events. This brings participants into contact with people from their own community and helps build social networks beyond the people they meet in Chats. Participants can also use the resources of Chats to maintain relationships they have with other friends and groups outside the program. If it brings people together, Chats will support it. A particular strength of the program has been the enthusiasm with which some participants have undertaken the volunteer's role of supporting other participants at activities. Participant involvement at all levels of Chats is encouraged particularly in suggesting, planning and coordinating activities. This active engagement of participants is what is driving the program forward, hence the motto 'Embrace Life!'.

Referrals to Chats can be made by anyone, simply by phoning the Chats office on 6224 3450. Potential participants can make direct contact or Chats staff will contact them, with their approval.

**References:**

Cattan, M., White, M., Bond, J. & Learmouth, A. (2005). Preventing social isolation and loneliness among older people: a systematic review of health promotion interventions. *Ageing and Society*, 25, 41-67.



**Photo; The Chats trip to the Deloraine Craft Fair stops for morning tea at Ross.**