



Engaging older men...

Barriers and strategies for health and community services

Ever wondered why it is difficult to engage older men in services? This resource discusses the challenges older men have in seeking help, and lists practical strategies to help your organisation engage older men more successfully.

The importance of engaging older men

By 2026, it is anticipated the number of people over 65 will more than double. Nearly 50% of this demographic are older men, who are already a marginalised high risk group. Therefore, the challenges of successfully engaging older men is paramount for health, welfare, and community organisations.

The difficulty organisations have engaging older men is no secret. For men, ageing provides a challenge to their masculinity as their support needs increase.

By understanding these challenges, and integrating appropriate engagement strategies, service providers can more successfully liaise and interact with older men.

This will ultimately increase their participation in services, and social support programs.

Practical strategies for your organisation

Use the strategies listed in this resource when designing your service delivery models. There are many ways to effectively engage older men. Work with your team to choose the strategies that best suit your service.





Barriers faced by older men accessing services

Research indicates there are unique help seeking barriers preventing men from seeking support.

Traditional male culture

Many older men were raised in a traditional male culture of rigid gender roles which strongly values independence, hard work, stoicism, and resilience. This culture contributes significantly to their hesitation to accept support services. Many men see asking for help as a weakness and don't prioritise this support as necessary for them.

Language of care rather than independence

Many men will not ask for help because they do not want to be a burden or be seen to be less independent. Most support services are led and provided by women, with services using terms such as care and assistance rather than independence. Men do not see how they can receive care, and still be independent.

Protective of privacy

Older men can feel suspicious of new activities and protective of their privacy. They can distrust support services and see them as intruding into their personal life. They have learnt to deal with difficult circumstances by relying on family and close friends rather than on strangers. Poor socialisation skills can also contribute to their isolation.

Services poorly targeted and promoted

Many men feel the services and activities offered are not relevant to their needs. Promotional material often portrays men as frail and passive recipients of services, convincing many that they are not the target group. Men are less likely to read information, preferring a direct approach and encouragement from a mate, family member, or service provider.

Fear of losing control

Australian research shows that men who strongly identified with being tough and self-reliant were more at risk of suicide. This toughness is one reason older men don't often take the initiative in attending to their health and wellbeing, and are reluctant to engage with the health and community sector until crisis point. Fearing a loss of control over their health and independence is a strong barrier to seeking help.

Older men will engage successfully if you provide the right environment.

Strategies to engage older men

Services can successfully engage older men by adapting support programs to address the barriers faced by older men.



Appropriate service models

To encourage older men into your service, a person centred model works well as it focusses on enabling an individual to achieve what is important to them. This works particularly well with men. Service models therefore should promote independence and support positive ageing rather than define people in terms of their illness.

Men of these generations place a very high value on independence, self-reliance, and feeling in control. Avoid dependence models that promote care, help and therapy.

Strategies

- 1 Support masculine independence into older age.
- 2 Encourage older men to make choices. This provides men with a greater sense of control over the direction of their life and the services they receive.
- 3 Approach him as an equal. The goal is to create a solution together.
- 4 Older male carers prefer to be respected as the primary decision-makers about care related matters, such as home support or respite. Engage their active participation in such decisions rather than assume they are also dependent.
- 5 Older men find accepting services less threatening if they are offered one service at a time, they are far more likely to accept other services in the future.
- 6 Male friendly environments include a less formal, less clinical setting – avoid feminisation of spaces.
- 7 Promotional materials should avoid photos depicting men as frail, dependant, and being cared for.
- 8 When using the service, always provide an environment that maintains their independence e.g. preparing their own cup of tea.
- 9 Language choice is critical when engaging older men. Men do not want to be made to feel like they are accepting charity or are weak, fragile or needy. Use empowering language such as 'taking control of your health', or 'it's about remaining independent, not losing independence'.
- 10 In a female dominated service, staff can slip into a language men find disrespectful. Words such as dear, sweetie, and love, demonstrates a mothering approach which emasculates men.

Encouraging uptake of referrals

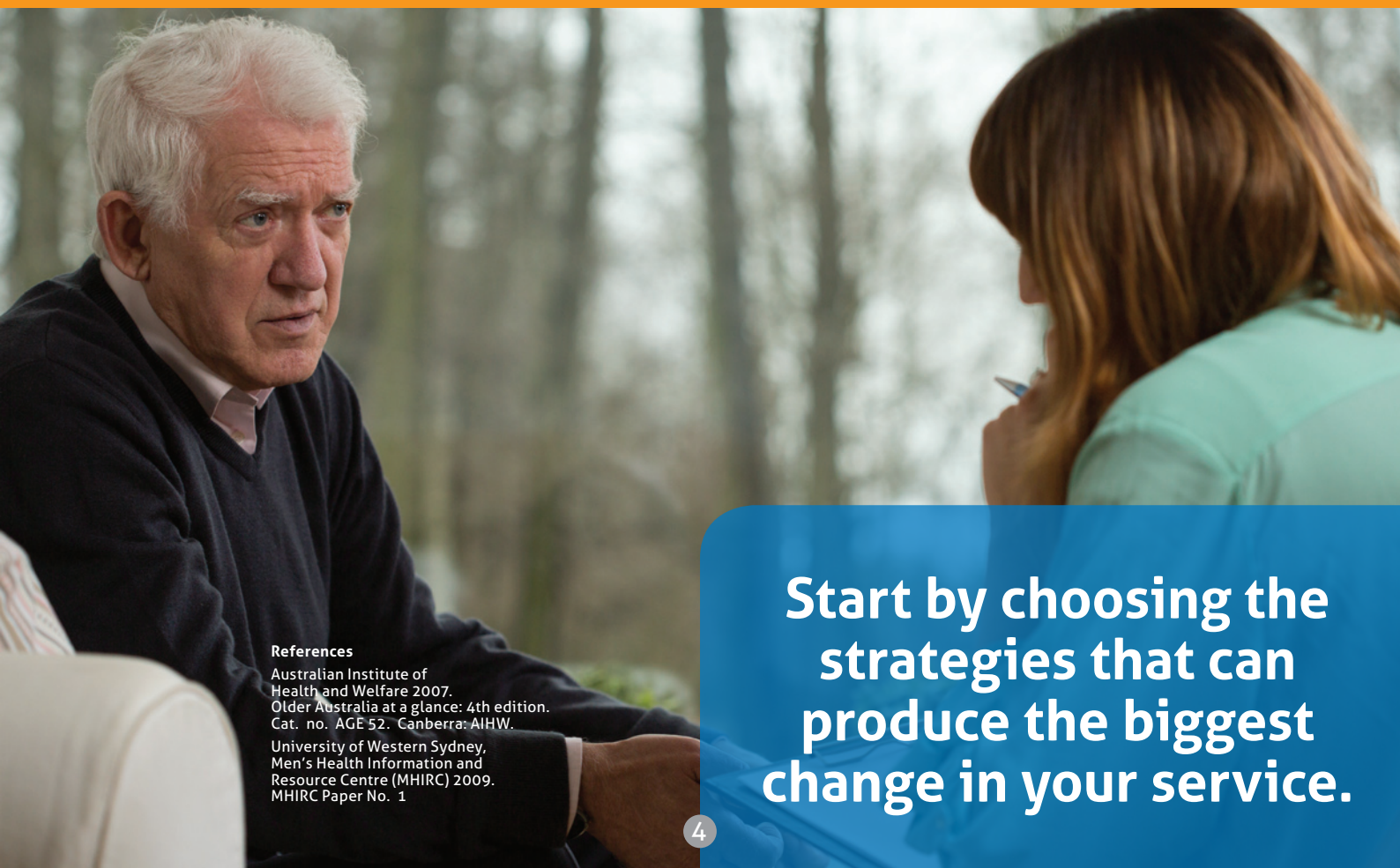
Traditional male culture prevents many men from developing a vocabulary to express what they are feeling, including how to ask for support or take up a referral. Many have left it to their wives to communicate their health and medical needs, and without her, he may not know how to approach a service provider.

Older men can be embarrassed to ask for assistance, particularly if they have personal care needs or are doing it tough emotionally.

The generation gap between younger workers and older men presents another barrier to referrals. Younger workers may struggle to associate with a phase of life that feels so far away. Older men don't enjoy young staff telling them what to do. It is important for each generation to understand and appreciate each other's life phases.

Strategies

- 1 Provide a single contact within an agency. Men often feel shame when they admit they need support. Repeating his story to different workers compounds this shame, generates higher levels of mistrust, and significantly decreases the likelihood of him accepting further referrals.
- 2 Men often seek consultation rather than consolation. Respect their need for actionable goals and work together with them on this.
- 3 Value the opportunity to learn and share their life experiences rather than judge them for their current state. Indicate genuine interest and use encouraging statements such as 'you have so much to offer', or 'it's valuable for us to hear about your experiences with this situation'.
- 4 During appointments, ask rather than tell. Ask, 'Could you tell me about...?' rather than 'What you need to do is...'
- 5 Be patient. Brain neural pathways weaken with age, so it can take more time for older people to process and respond to information. It does not mean their capacity to do mental and physical tasks cannot be achieved.
- 6 If a man refuses assistance, offer attention and support to explore his perceptions, concerns and reasons for refusal to better understand him. Allow men to choose the time when they are ready to talk about their experience.



References

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2007. Older Australia at a glance: 4th edition. Cat. no. AGE 52. Canberra: AIHW.
University of Western Sydney, Men's Health Information and Resource Centre (MHIRC) 2009. MHIRC Paper No. 1

Start by choosing the strategies that can produce the biggest change in your service.

Building relationships

Many older men will not take up a referral or accept assistance at the first level of engagement. They may say they are 'just fine', fearing that accepting support is the beginning of a steady decline.

In their own time, older men come to acknowledge their need for support. They will choose to access and engage over time if the process respects their choice to become involved when they are ready to do so. Taking time to establish trust and build relationships is a high priority.



Strategies

- 1 Older men need to trust you. Take time to get to know him and his story. Developing a connection is the first step in encouraging older men to engage with you.
- 2 While he may refuse support now, building a trusting relationship will mean he will access your service when he is ready.
- 3 Ask men what they want. Organised social activities that cater to women's interests, or activities that involve a lot of women may not be what they want. Older men prefer to engage in meaningful activity with other men.

Valuing men in retirement

Men frequently associate their self-worth and purpose in life with their job. Work environments generally provide structured pathways and social networks for men. When their career ends, many lose their identity, sense of contribution and achievement. Without this status, they no longer feel valued for their skills and experience, and their confidence can suffer.

Our society often undervalues our older generations, who each in their own way have contributed to the fabric of our communities. It is assumed that at a certain age people suddenly become useless, and therefore must be content with being idle for the rest of their lives. We all need to feel valued and empowered, no matter what the age.



Strategies

- 1 Understanding the impact retirement has on older men provides clues as to how to engage older men.
- 2 Recognise they are still capable of making a contribution to the wider community, and encourage them to do so.
- 3 Don't fall into the trap of ageism. The older generation have had extraordinary lives and deserve to be treated with respect and dignity for their amazing contributions to our communities.

For more resources, visit www.tomnet.org.au



"There are many circumstances why we come here. It's a great thing to be involved in. I love every second of it."

– Peter

At TOMNET we create networks of retired men who genuinely care about the welfare of each other. TOMNET provides a sense of belonging. We hold weekly gatherings, events, interest groups and barbecue services. We also run volunteering programs and provide professional support.

TOMNET is about retired men supporting each other through hidden hardships to improve their mental health and well-being, and prevent suicide. Through rediscovering fulfilling lives, TOMNET men regain purpose, the ability to connect, and contribute to the community.

5 ways TOMNET supports older men in the community

Members provide peer support to:

- 1 Male residents in aged care facilities
- 2 Isolated, at risk older men through home visits
- 3 Isolated Members through telephone support
- 4 New and established Affiliate Groups
- 5 Disadvantaged youth by sharing skills and mentoring

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Where to go for help

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TOMNET has affiliate groups in Toowoomba, Brisbane, Bundaberg, Crows Nest, Goondiwindi, Highfields, Inglewood, Millmerran, Mt Gravatt, Oakey, Roma and Tara.

If you are thinking about suicide or experiencing a personal crisis, help is available.

**FOR IMMEDIATE CRISIS
HELP 24 HOURS A DAY,
CALL LIFELINE 13 11 14**

**CALL 000
(EMERGENCY SERVICES)
IF LIFE IS IN DANGER**