

Forming Men's Groups in Residential Care Facilities





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The History of TOMNET

Phase 1: The Beginning

Toowoomba Older Men's Network Inc. (TOMNET) originated in 2001 as a pilot project entitled "Prevention is the Only Cure" to address suicide prevention among older men. This funding allowed for the employment of a qualified part time Coordinator for 30 hours a week to oversee the establishment of the network.

TOMNET chose a life enhancement approach that would embrace all older men without exception. By contributing to a man's quality of life through connecting and interacting with his peers, TOMNET became an appropriate suicide prevention strategy – and much more.

The program identified the vulnerability that men experience in older age, in particular the risk of social isolation and the often compounding factors of mental illness, physical illness and the death of a spouse which may contribute to feelings of depression, loss and a sense of worthlessness. For many men, older age places restrictions on their ability to connect with their community. Retirement combined with feelings of redundancy and marginalisation, loss of a driver's licence, ill health, mobility issues and a disconnect with friends and family who move away, can all place many men in a high-risk situation for loneliness, anxiety and suicide. It also became evident that men come face to face with the reality of their own mortality and end of life issues as they age.

This funding continued for a period of eighteen months and ceased in September 2002, during which time TOMNET grew to support a membership of over thirty-five men. Following the cessation of funding there was a period where the Coordinator continued as a volunteer consultant for a further fifteen months. During this time the members identified the purpose, philosophy and processes required to consolidate the network to ensure its future sustainability. These three aspects of community development have underpinned the character and culture of TOMNET and are still evident today.

Purpose and philosophy of the network

The purpose was to provide a social and support network for older men regardless of their circumstances.

TOMNET adopted a community development approach under its original auspice of The Older People's Action Program (TOPAP). This enabled it to develop its own character and personality in an autonomous fashion. The philosophy was based on valuing and acknowledging older men as both contributors to and recipients of the network.

As stated in Kenny (1999), *"From a community development perspective, the purpose of community organisations is to help groups of ordinary people to gain control over their lives"* (p.172). This understanding underpinned the foundation of TOMNET.

The drop in centre was fundamental from the start but developed organically rather than intentionally. Men would turn up, get a feel for the social environment and linger. They would 'hang about' waiting for something to happen, initiate or respond to some interaction.

The following principles of community work as described by Kenny (1999) below, were adopted by TOMNET and developed over time into the model that still operates today. Each principle is explained below:

- No hierarchy, no fixed internal authority
 - * Whilst a part time coordinator guided the group's early direction and developmental process, his authority came through his professional 'know-how' rather than from a particular hierarchy or structure of authority.
- Equality in decision making
 - * Decision making was a collective activity that reflected a truly democratic spirit and equality.
- Everyone being welcome to participate
 - * From the outset, members were invited and expected to participate as much or as little as their interest and circumstances allowed.
- Encouragement of spontaneity
 - * Members were encouraged to express their individuality, to share their life experiences and wisdom for the benefit of the individual and the group.
- Flexibility and assertive solution to problems
 - * The paradox was that encouraging greater flexibility resulted in the group progressing to a constant and preferred way of doing things. Assertive interactions were encouraged, nurtured and modelled to prevent or replace either aggressive or passive behaviours.
- Equality in power, status, tasks and responsibilities for all
 - * TOMNET from the beginning became a leveller of men where everyone engaged in a manner of shared activity and responsibility.
- Agreement is by consensus
 - * Despite diverse views held passionately, a genuine democratic process prevailed and underpinned the principle of majority rule. The common good over-ruled individual differences.
- Agreement that everyone has something to offer, to share their skills and contribute to others.
 - * Every member was valued as a unique individual and worthy of recognition and respect. Their capacity to contribute to the group through a process of giving and receiving was considered to be beneficial to all concerned.

Process

The process provides opportunities for participation, ownership, empowerment and self-determination both individually and collectively with a focus of “older men supporting older men”.

Phase 2 - Consolidation

In 2004, without the assistance of qualified staff, the inaugural members incorporated the network and secured a venue to manage their growing operations. Following a successful application in October 2004, one-year funding through a philanthropic source was obtained. As a result, the men employed the services of another qualified Coordinator.

During this period, the members were instrumental in establishing six men’s groups in high-risk communities throughout South-West Queensland. In September 2005, TOMNET was successful in obtaining one-off funding grants through the Queensland Department of Communities to further their business operations and outreach services. As a direct result of this funding, TOMNET retained the services of their Coordinator which guaranteed the continuation of the office/resource centre and further expansion of outreach services into high-risk rural communities. In November 2008, TOMNET received recurrent funding from the Department of Communities, commencing 1st July 2009 for a period of three years. This funding is to maintain TOMNET activities in the Toowoomba region only.

Phase 3 – Sustainability

Community Connections Project

In November 2006, TOMNET secured three-year project funding through the Federal Department of Health & Ageing under the National Suicide Prevention Strategy, ending on 30 May 2009.

The funding for the project titled “Community Connections – Phase 1” directly enabled TOMNET to further develop and implement more effective and innovative responses to reducing suicide among older men and further consolidate a coordinated regional network which stretches to Pittsworth, Oakey, Crows Nest, Inglewood, Tara, Roma, Millmerran, Clifton, Dalby, Goondiwindi, Kingaroy, Mitchell and Injune.

In 2009, TOMNET was fortunate to receive a further two-years funding through the Federal Department of Health & Ageing under the National Suicide Prevention Strategy, ending on 30 May 2011. Phase 2 of the Community Connections Program continues to implement successful suicide prevention outcomes adopted in the first phase and further expand on the experience, learning and achievements already gained.

“Phase 2 aimed to significantly extend the services available to older men...”

In addition, Phase 2 aimed to significantly extend the services available to older men by bringing together a variety of organisations, key stakeholders and resources to assist in the consolidation of a sustainable and coordinated regional network. Consequently the name of the organisation changed from Toowoomba Older Men's Network Inc to The Older Men's Network Inc, reflecting the broader reach of the regional network. This network has built on the learning from Phase 1 and developed new responses to reducing suicide among older men.

By facilitating the provision of a wide range of support for at risk older men at the emotional, social and physical level, TOMNET continues to establish and promote best practice in this field amongst other stakeholders and across Queensland.

TOMNET continues to be committed to providing older men with the opportunity to benefit from peer support, social activities, to share and care for one another where times and life experiences are somewhat common or understood by their own generation, and the opportunity to gain/regain a genuine sense of belonging in community. Today, TOMNET has become an effective means of social engagement and a pleasant source of health promotion and well-being for older men.

Phase 4 – Learning about Older Men

Older men are one of the key groups vulnerable to high levels of suicide. The Australian Bureau of Statistics report 'Causes of Death 3303.3', 2007 noted that suicide rates for older men aged 75+ in 2005 were 21.6 per 100,000. In comparison, the rates for older women aged 75+ were 6 per 100,000. Suicide rates for older men steadily increase from the age of 65 onwards.

Older men experience a unique and challenging transition once the work place ceases to be a major part of their lives. The loss of significant relationships in the workplace and the removal of social activities with colleagues can lead to greater isolation. With increasing age can come increasing dependence on others and this dependence can have significant ramifications on a man's desire and willingness to take part in social activities that he might once have enjoyed outside of work.

“Older men are one of the key groups vulnerable to high levels of suicide”

Men in general use their home as their escape from the world and can be less comfortable in mixed social settings once the topic of work is no longer on the agenda. For men who have lost their wives through divorce or death, this time can be especially lonely and the family home can be both a safe place and a prison. Equally important though, is having a place to go where they are not pressured to share their emotions or communicate with women if they don't want to. This is normal and characteristic of older men in general.

TOMNET's definition of 'older men'

Whilst the organisation originally developed a model based on older men being aged 55 and above, over time this guideline has been amended to 50 years plus. By involving men younger than 55 in the membership and targeting of the group, TOMNET can provide services to men who were 'falling into the gaps' of social justice service provision, particularly in relation to issues caused by early retirement, ill health, divorce and mental illness.

Understanding men from different generations

The greatest gains in knowledge and understanding that TOMNET has acquired since its inception, has been in relation to two unique generations of men known largely as the Builder generation (1920's -1945) and the Baby Boomer generation (1946-1964). These generations make up the TOMNET membership and thus largely define the type of needs that TOMNET responds to in its outreach groups. Men in care facilities largely belong to the former.

The Builder generation

The Builder generation include those individuals born between the early 1920's and 1945. They are also known as the Traditionalists and the Silent Generation. This generation was integral to building the nation and have lived through and often actively participated in, some of the world's most momentous events including the Great Depression, World War II, the Korean War, the bombing of Darwin and the dropping of the atomic bomb.

It is a generation with a tradition of hard work, patriotism and frugality. As individuals they are particularly loyal to institutions and respectful of authority whilst being dependable and private people. Based on their life experiences they have learned to deal with difficult circumstances by relying on family and close friends and getting on with life. They would rather do without than rely on others to provide and they are often extremely cautious about the world and suspicious of the technology that is so commonplace in all realms of western society today.

These life experiences have also been influential in fostering a culture of older age in which older men avoid taking the initiative in attending to their needs of health and wellbeing. For example the concept of 'work until you die' is not unfamiliar to many older men in their seventies and eighties who are still working on farms and in industry despite significant health problems. As older men they resist dependence of any sort, prefer to keep their lives private. Hence many older men are reluctant to engage with the health and community sector until things reach crisis point.

These common generational traits extend to the way that older men see themselves fitting into their community as they age. Once they find themselves disconnected from those who once provided support, such as their wives or family members, they do not easily re-engage with new people or activities. However, TOMNET has learnt that many men are responsive to the initiative of others who show interest, care and concern on their behalf, which can lead to them reversing this behaviour.

Messages such as 'You have so much to offer' and 'It's valuable for us to hear about your experiences with this situation' are important to this generation in attempts to re-engage them into social networks.

Provided the person extending the invitation for support gives them the time to develop a sense of loyalty and trust and proves that they are worthy of their respect, re-engagement can often occur.

Overarching needs of older men

As TOMNET'S work with older men's groups developed, the needs of the men who were the primary focus of each group became clearer. TOMNET found that the men had some overarching, generic needs which were combined with the individual needs that each person brought with him. The more generic needs of older men, as identified by Earle and Fopp (1999) are identified below.

Involvement

It was imperative that involvement in TOMNET was imbued with a strong sense of belonging. This might have meant belonging to an accessible personal community of friends or to a social support network. Having social interaction or people to share activities with required experience at the giving and receiving ends of interaction and activity. It may have included a mate who was recognised as having a valued place in the dynamics of TOMNET. The nature, level and extent of involvement remained an individual and personal matter.

Satisfaction

This arose from meaningful and purposeful involvement in TOMNET. It implies pleasure and a sense of fulfilment, without which it would flag and falter. Whilst satisfaction varied from time to time it essentially remained as an important motivational factor.

Autonomy

All sorts and conditions of men have been represented in TOMNET. Unique knowledge and skills are recognised and used with a sense of freedom to determine one's own actions. The flux of change also impacted on the nature and quality of interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless this was an acceptable feature of members where they could simply be themselves, be valued for whom they were – warts and all, with their peculiar imperfections and blemishes.

Integration

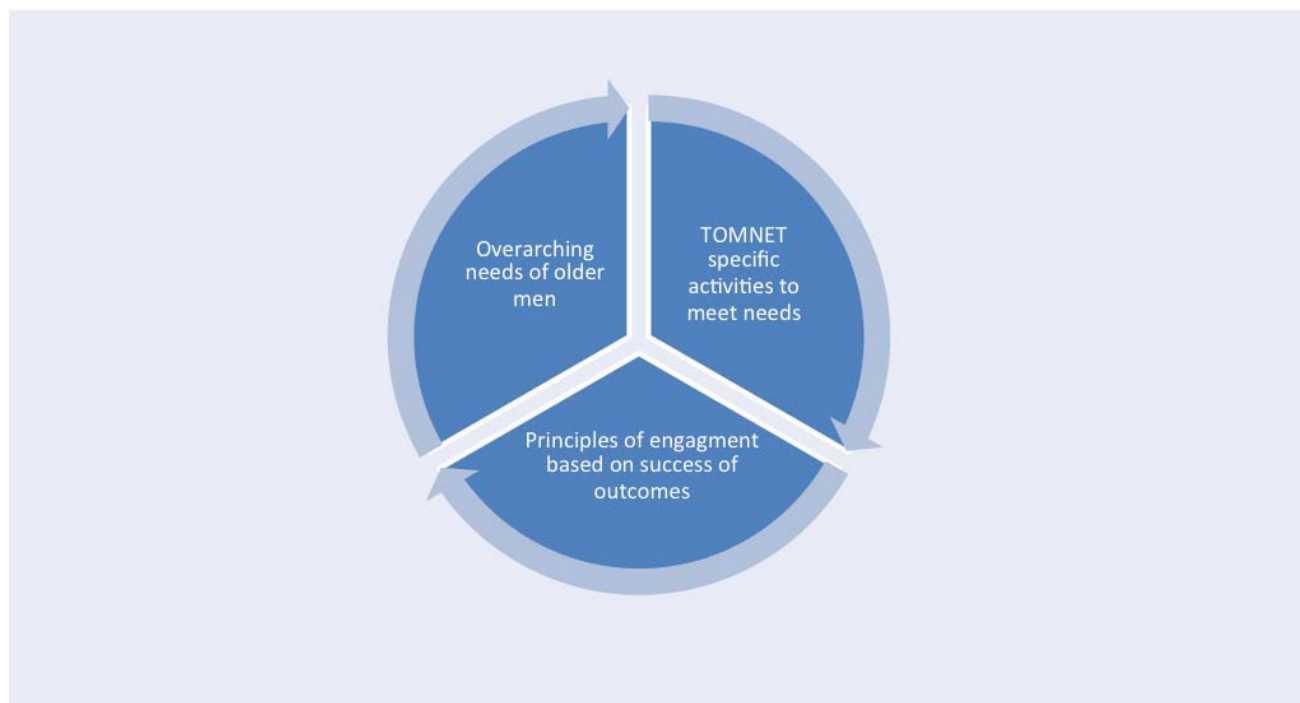
Here again is the importance of a sense of belonging. Integration is both an outcome of mutual belonging and the glue that bound the members together. Integration reinforced a positive sense of self worth. This self worth was obviously beneficial to the individual; it was also of benefit to others impacted by it. It was integration that created and maintained the culture of TOMNET.

Creativity

Creativity may be related to past pursuits or the expression of more recent interests and aspirations to be pursued. It is about personal challenges, the expression of particular skills and interests and capitalising upon a lifetime of learning and experience. The benefit of hindsight as well as the excitement of discovery becomes the experience of many a TOMNET man.

Using these generic needs as the starting point, TOMNET developed activities which directed the operational aspects of the group. Based on the feedback arising from the activities that were undertaken, core principles of engaging with older men were developed. This process is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1



Getting to the heart of engagement

TOMNET's experiences in working with older men's groups including groups in care facilities has led to a deeper appreciation of how an organisation can best identify engagement areas that matter to older men. Many of these observations are supported by the literature on ageing and represent a glimpse into the opportunities afforded to participants, staff and volunteers, when a superficial approach to engagement is avoided.

Acknowledge the fact of ageing

To meet the needs of older men we need to learn from them. This is achieved by deepening our understanding of older ageing in general and the experience of ageing in older men in particular. Davenhill states, *"The transition across the later years of life involves mourning, both in connection with that which has been had and lost as well as for those things which may never have been experienced. The capacity to cope with transition, loss and change in later life is rooted in ways of facing loss forged much earlier in life"* (Davenhill, 2004. 4).

A man's life course includes old age. Jung (quoted in Bacelle, 2004, 33) noted however that: *"The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage of life's morning..Unfortunately there is not enough meaning and purpose for those who see in the approach of old age a mere diminution of life and can feel their earlier ideals only as something fading and worn...for many people all too much unlive life remains...they approach the threshold of old age with unsatisfied demands"*.

Recognising these experiences for what they are and respecting that every man's journey is his own is part of appreciating that ageing, whilst a universal experience, is not the same for everyone.

Understanding physical and social health and wellbeing

People working with men in care facilities generally have a good working knowledge of the issues that affect an older man's health and wellbeing. TOMNET volunteers are also well versed in these issues, sometimes through direct experience and at other times through internal education programs. The men demonstrate variable levels of physical health at different times. Heart attacks and stroke are not uncommon and often lead to disability and a loss of independence.

Mental health problems including cognitive impairment and deterioration are common experiences. The social health of the men, while being recognised as essential to other aspects of health, is not always able to be catered for adequately. It is important therefore that a holistic approach to a man's health is taken and in this regard, TOMNET uses a biopsychosocial orientation to care.

This approach means takes into consideration the man's physical health and functional capabilities, having realistic expectations of his capacity and facilitating in appropriate ways to engage and involve him in activities given his health. With reference to the psychological health of the men, both cognitive and emotional levels of functioning are considered. Social health remains variable both for the individual and across the cohort of older men. Maximising appropriate social interaction is essential in providing meaningful activities for older men.

Addressing loneliness

Experience tells us that loneliness can occur in families, among friends and carers and even while experiencing loving care and attention. This is particular pertinent to men in care facilities. For some, loneliness may be self-imposed resulting from self-centredness, retreating from others and the effort required in relating to another. The individual's focus may be on self-reliance, sometimes with a sense of superiority, a belief that the man himself possesses all the necessary resources of goodness, wisdom and understanding, for example, and that what others can offer him is of little value (Cohan 1982).

However it is also known that solitude, the up-side of being alone, can be a desired emotional achievement for many. According to Zachary (1998) solitude can be a source of confidence, dignity, self-preservation deserving of appreciation or even admiration.

Whatever the older man's disposition – dependent or independent – the nature of his loneliness or solitude needs to be addressed with sensitivity, acceptance and understanding. But as Hess (2004, 26) reminds us, "the pain of being alone is fundamentally related to being alone with oneself and what we feel to be inside us, be it predominately persecutory, critical and aggressive or loving, supportive and forgiving".

Reflecting on the past

Reflecting on a man's early life can be both painful and pleasant. There are likely to have been occasions of foolishness and wisdom where some of life has been wasted and other areas found highly worthwhile. The older man may have oscillated between all sorts of polarities. Whatever the reflective focus older age can bring, attention is turned from the external elements of the past to the internal elements of the present.

Cicero (45 B. C.) argued that the quality of old age depends on the quality of experience in younger days. It is this quality of experience and not the fact of ageing that give the individual his character in his later years. Cicero emphasized the need to train both mind and body to "glide gradually and imperceptibly into old age" (Bacelle, 2004, 35). Some men achieve this while others struggle to come to terms with the transitional ageing inevitability.

Maintaining relationships

Old age could be described as one crisis or challenge after another. The relationship with people around an older man may be the only anchor in a swiftly shifting world he has. (Evans 2004.45) Anchorage in line with other older men may be extremely important, hence the supportive role that older men's groups can play in establishing new relationships or maintaining existing ones.

Opportunities for older men to make new friends and relationships may diminish as does their interest and energy associated with such niceties (Shah and De, 1998). However, ongoing attachments may confer special meaning simply because they continue (Thompson, 1993). As Bowlby (1980) stated, meaningful attachments to others are "the hub of human existence" and their importance does not change regardless of age.

Especially in old age the absence of a partner or significant other combined with the disintegration of the usual reciprocity and support and dependence, can be difficult and even be intolerable. Replacement attachments become important even though the former gap may never be filled.

Managing anxiety

A common response to anxiety in old age is adopting the fight or flight path; that is, run from the situation causing the anxiety or confront it. The more severe anxiety is and its general association with loss of one kind or another can increase the need to be supported. A natural response is to seek attachment, or even cling to another, despite often a reluctance to do this at times of vulnerability. The support provided by having other older men to share worries with can reduce the hold that unspecified fear may have over a person and his life.

Addressing depression

Although depression is not caused by old age it nevertheless exists in many older men. Clinically depressed people often withdraw from others, and by detaching themselves increase their morbidity and even increase the risk of suicide. Suicide ideation and behaviour often increases where the person believes that no one else will suffer at their death and that they will no longer be a burden to others.

There is a mistaken view that depression is an inevitable or even "normal" part of older ageing. This is despite the fact that as life is approaching the end, older people have weathered all that life has thrown them and have successfully navigated their lives to the present. They can, in the main, reminisce without becoming depressed as they look back on their joys and sorrows.

The needs of older men in care facilities that can be met by a group

The range of needs which can be met by the formation of an older men's support group is enormous and includes:

- the group is brought to them for their convenience without having to leave the facility
- chance to gain or regain a sense of mateship in a safe environment
- increased social opportunities for lonely or isolated men
- opportunities to communicate with others and make friends
- participating in new activities and challenges
- opportunity to share personal stories and hear from others
- development of new roles in the group
- development of new social networks or expansion of existing ones
- information and discussion on common health issues experienced by older men in a supportive setting
- freedom to speak and act without needing to moderate actions or behaviour in an all male environment
- tackle mental health issues such as depression and anxiety by having a purpose and a function to perform
- achievement of new goals and motivation to get up in the morning and be active.

The difference between a TOMNET support group and a health support group

The TOMNET model of support does not fit the definition of total self-help group or the definition of total support group. The TOMNET model is a hybrid model of different group purposes and outcomes (Kuntz, 1997). TOMNET's purpose is the giving of emotional and social support as well as information to men with a range of common problems. Unlike other support groups, membership is not exclusive to men with one common problem.

Health support groups tend to focus on common health issues such as depression, alcoholism, cancer or mental health issues as the focus of the group's support as well as the membership. TOMNET however is a support group inclusive of all older men and all of their concerns related to being an older man. Whilst the provision of information generally focuses on older men's issues, of which health is one core concern, the group does not exist purely to give emotional support on only health issues, financial issues or social isolation issues.

Schopler and Galinsky (1995) suggest that a continuum model with self-help groups at one end and psychotherapy groups at the other is one way of making sense of the broad range of support groups and their functions. In this continuum, support groups sit somewhere in the middle. TOMNET can be located at any point along the continuum depending on when the organisation is talked about or what particular activity the group is engaging in.

Making the support group a success

The TOMNET environment is conducive to men who are usually reluctant to talk about personal and significant events in their lives by being welcoming and encouraging participation in the development and delivery of services by the men themselves.

For older men it is important that the process of identifying a group, choosing to access it and engaging with it over time, is not hurried and respects their choice to become involved when they are ready to do so. Taking the time to establish trust and build relationships is a high priority. Since the inception of TOMNET, the model which has been developed has explored the different methods of successful engagement with older men with the findings incorporated into this manual to benefit the community and older men in the future.

In their own time, older men come to acknowledge their need for support while also recognising that they are still capable of making a contribution to the wellbeing of their peers and the wider community.

It has become apparent that the camaraderie that exists within the membership is characterised by genuine sharing, caring, giving and receiving. This is underlined by the fact that men are allowed and encouraged to become involved at any level of the organisation, giving as much or as little as their circumstances, interests and skills allow.

In TOMNET's experience, it is a combination of all these factors which makes for a successful social and support group for older men. Without these factors, the culture of TOMNET would not be sustained.

“The meetings are interesting. There is a lot of reminiscing. We are all about the same vintage although I'm a bit younger than most (age72). We can relate to days gone by especially the blokes from the country. I can even remember stories about my father's days. Yes, most of us seem to be on the same track.” Rob