Volunteers enriching older people’s wellbeing

A beyondblue program
Volunteer workbook

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Thanks to the following individuals for their contribution to this project
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Welcome to Volunteers enriching older people’s wellbeing: A beyondblue program. This program will provide you with information about anxiety and depression in older people and will explore how you can have a positive impact on the mental health of residents and clients.

Thank you beyondblue would like to acknowledge the important work you do as a volunteer. Volunteers play a significant role in aged care and enrich the lives of the residents and clients.

Volunteering is good for your mental health Research has consistently demonstrated that being a volunteer is good for your own mental health – so well done in taking a positive step for your own wellbeing.

The volunteer workbook This workbook supports a short training session. You can use this booklet as a guide during the session as it includes spaces to record answers to activities, key messages and links to additional references. The completed workbook can also be kept as a reference to support you in your work as a volunteer.
What you will cover in this program

1. Firstly you will look at anxiety and depression in the general population.

2. You will then focus on anxiety and depression in older people.

3. You will then look at what you can do as a volunteer and identify supportive strategies that promote older people’s wellbeing.

4. You will then focus on one particular strategy – reminiscence.

What you will learn from this program
At the end of this session, you will have a greater:

- understanding of anxiety and depression in the general population
- understanding of anxiety and depression in older people
- understanding of the impact of these conditions in older people
- awareness of strategies that you can implement as a volunteer to boost the mental health of the older people you support.

Our aim is also to reduce the stigma that surrounds anxiety and depression and contribute to better understanding of these conditions.

We want your feedback!
To ensure these resources are appropriate for volunteers, it is important that we get your feedback. Once you have completed this session, we would appreciate your feedback via a five minute survey which can be accessed through the beyondblue website at www.beyondblue.org.au/volunteerfeedback
What are anxiety and depression?

What is anxiety?

In this booklet, when we talk about anxiety, we are generally referring to an anxiety condition. If we are talking about anxiety that we all experience we will use the term the ‘feelings of anxiety’.

We are all familiar with the ‘feelings of anxiety’ which we can experience in the lead up to any anxiety-provoking event.

Anxiety occurs when these anxious feelings don’t subside – when they are ongoing and happen without any particular reason or cause. It’s a serious condition that makes it hard for a person to cope with daily life. We all feel anxious from time to time, but for a person experiencing an anxiety condition these feelings cannot be easily controlled.
Activity 1.1 – Reflecting on the experience of an anxiety-provoking event

For this activity you need to reflect on an event that you find anxiety-provoking. You might like to reflect on public speaking. Imagine that you have to address a large group and you are waiting your turn to present. What might be some of the feelings of anxiety you are experiencing as you wait your turn to speak?

Record your responses below. You may then compare your answers to the person next to you.
These feelings of anxiety that you listed on the previous page are different to an anxiety condition because once you have presented and returned to your seat, those feelings of anxiety subside, and you start to relax. However for a person with an anxiety condition their feelings don’t subside; they are not linked to a particular event. The person carries these feelings around with them all the time which can be completely overwhelming.

**Anxiety is a serious health condition that can make it difficult to function on a daily basis.**

There are many different types of anxiety and you may have heard of some of these conditions, such as:

- generalised anxiety disorder
- social anxiety disorder
- specific phobias

While the symptoms for each type of anxiety will be different, you will find that people with anxiety will experience symptoms from across various categories. An example from each category is provided below:

- **Physical** – having trouble getting to sleep
- **Behavioural** – avoiding social occasions
- **Thinking** – constant worrying and obsessive thoughts
- **Feelings** – sudden intense panics.

**What is depression?**

We can all relate to feeling down from time to time and we may say that we are depressed about the weather or if our sports team loses – but that feeling is very different to depression.

**Depression is a serious health condition that impacts upon physical and mental health.**

A person may be depressed if for two weeks or more, he or she has felt sad, down or miserable most of the time or has lost interest or pleasure in most of their usual activities.

Like anxiety, people with depression will experience symptoms across various categories. An example from each category is provided below:

- **physical** – fatigue
- **behavioural** – not doing usual activities
- **thinking** – negative thinking patterns
- **feelings** – overwhelmed.

**How common are anxiety and depression?**

The following statements relate to how prevalent (common) depression and anxiety are in the general population.
Activity 1.2 – Quiz

Read through each statement and decide if the statement is true or false and record your answer in the last column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>True or False</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  One in seven people in Australia (15 per cent) will experience depression in their lifetime.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  Anxiety is more common than depression across the population with approximately 26 per cent of people experiencing anxiety in their lifetime.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  One in six people in Australia is currently experiencing depression or anxiety or both.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  Depression and anxiety are more common in women than men.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once you complete this quiz, your facilitator will discuss the answers with the group.

Further reading

If you wish to find out more information about anxiety and depression and their prevalence, you can go to [www.beyondblue.org.au/resources](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/resources) and download the following resources.

- Depression and anxiety: An information booklet
- Understanding depression and anxiety
Anxiety in older people

Anxiety is the most common mental health condition in Australia. On average, one in four people – one in three women and one in five men – will experience anxiety.¹

The precise rates of anxiety in older people are not yet known, however it is thought that approximately 10 per cent of Australians over the age of 65 experience anxiety.²

“I feel a great sense of doom and gloom. I withdraw from friends and family. I don’t answer the phone or leave the house. I sleep a lot and stop eating. I cry and have suicidal thoughts. The anxiety manifests as rapid heartbeats, sweating, nausea and a feeling of almost paralysis.”

– Penelope, 65, NSW

Activity 1.3 – Reflecting on the experience of an older person with anxiety

1. What were some of the ‘feelings of anxiety’ that Penelope described in her quote above?
Beyond those feelings of anxiety, Penelope described severe symptoms that were not associated with a particular event that impacted upon her ability to function.

2. What were some of those severe symptoms that she experienced as part of her anxiety?

3. Can you provide some examples of how Penelope coped with her anxiety?

4. Do you think Penelope’s anxiety is different to anxiety experienced at a younger age? If so, why?

Your facilitator will discuss your answers with you once you complete this activity.

It is more common that an older person will experience anxiety if they have had a history of anxiety.
Depression in older people

On average, one in six people – one in five women and one in eight men – will experience depression at some stage of their lives.¹

The risk of developing anxiety or depression in an older person is in line with the rest of the population.² However an older person’s risk of developing these conditions can increase with:

• chronic illness
• pain
• changes in accommodation
• grief and loss
• dementia.

“I lost motivation, found it hard to get up in the morning, lost all joy in things formerly that interested and fulfilled me. Sad, blue, not eating, not interested in life, couldn’t care less about things that used to matter. Feelings of hopelessness, deep grief, tired all the time, unable to sleep... I just seemed to be existing in some kind of a blue fog.”

– Jill, 70, NSW

Activity 1.4 – Reflecting on the experience of an older person with depression

1. What was different in this experience of depression that Jill described compared to what Penelope described with her anxiety?

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2. From Jill’s description of her depression, identify a symptom from the various categories as described earlier on page 8.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Symptom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. What were some of Jill’s symptoms that would have impacted on her ability to function on a daily basis?

Your facilitator will discuss your answers with you once you complete this activity.

*Depression in older people often presents with more physical symptoms rather than symptoms from the other categories. Depression is not a normal part of ageing.*
Prevalence in older people
Research shows that for frail older people in the community who require support to remain at home, the rate of depression can be as high as 30 per cent compared to older people who need less support. For older people in residential care the rates of depression can be as high as 50 per cent. The rates of anxiety for these groups are as yet unknown but believed to be higher than the depression prevalence rates.

“My depression was related to work stress and the after effects of a physical injury. The impact was probably increased by some of the effects of fibromyalgia, a chronic musculo-skeletal condition with fatigue and sleep disorders as components.”

– Brian, 68, Vic

Further reading
If you wish to find out more information about anxiety and depression, you can download:
Anxiety and depression in older people booklet available at www.beyondblue.org.au/resources
Older people accessing residential or community aged care services may present with anxiety and/or depression as well as dementia, which can make it difficult to recognise either condition.

It can be difficult to recognise the changes associated with dementia and anxiety or depression as the older person may not be able to communicate what they are experiencing and the symptoms of these conditions overlap. Screening tools exist that can alert aged care staff to those changes.

Activity 1.5 – Ruth and Sybil, the experience of depression and dementia

You can do this activity in pairs.

You are about to watch a video in which you will meet Sybil and her daughter, Ruth. Sybil has dementia and depression and her daughter Ruth describes some of the changes she noticed with her mother.

Once you have watched the video, work with your partner to answer the following questions.

Your facilitator will then discuss your group’s responses.

Your facilitator will also distribute beyondblue’s fact sheet, Dementia, anxiety and depression to assist you to respond to the questions below.

1. What did Ruth notice that alerted her to changes in her mother’s mental health?
2. Did you find it difficult to separate out the changes associated with depression and the changes you might associate with dementia? Provide three examples of symptoms that could have been indicative of either depression or dementia.

i. 

ii. 

iii. 

Activity 1.6 – Quiz

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>True or false</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 20 per cent of people with Alzheimer’s disease develop depression.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. People with dementia often have the most disabling depression.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Less research has been conducted into anxiety and dementia than depression and dementia.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Dementia is a risk factor for developing depression.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Supportive strategies volunteers can implement to promote older people’s wellbeing

There are various strategies that can be effective for older people with dementia and depression.

Simple reminiscence can boost emotional wellbeing and is also effective for older people with depression in residential care.3

“Talking to mum about our family history is really important…. Dementia means that reminiscence is extremely important to keep those memories alive.”

– Ruth, daughter of Sybil
Activity 1.7 – Experiencing reminiscence

In this activity, you will need to work in pairs.
Recall a precious and much loved toy from your childhood. Think about:
• When you played with it?
• What it looked like?
• How long you had it for?
• What did it smell like?
• What did it feel like?
• How did playing with it make you feel?

Then turn to the person next to you and take turns to explain what this toy meant to you.

What you have just done is reminisce. You may find after this sharing that your mood has lifted – this can also be the impact of simple reminiscence for older people.

Reminiscence can be an enjoyable activity for all ages.

Activity 1.8 – Promoting older people’s wellbeing

Interventions that work for Sybil
Earlier you met Ruth and Sybil and you are now going to watch a continuation of their story specifically focusing on ways to promote Sybil’s mental health.

Once you have watched the video, answer the questions below. Your facilitator will discuss your group’s responses.

1. In this video, you saw Sybil’s family using reminiscence with Sybil. Can you name five different reminiscence activities that you saw or heard about in this video?
   i.  
   ii.  
   iii. 
   iv.  
   v.  

2. If you were supporting Sybil, what additional information could you discover from Sybil’s room that could assist you to reminisce with her?

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3. Imagine that someone is looking for ideas for reminiscence around YOUR home. What might they observe that could indicate subjects/topics of interest that would be useful for reminiscing with you?

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Simple reminiscence can be a powerful intervention that volunteers can use when working with older people. It can boost emotional wellbeing and can be effective for older people in residential care with depression.
Activity 1.9 – Volunteers using reminiscence with older people

In pairs or as a larger group, consider how volunteers can use simple reminiscence by answering the questions below. Some volunteers may already be using simple reminiscence and can share their learnings with the rest of the group. Your facilitator may direct you to work in pairs on this activity.

1. How can you use reminiscence with the older people that you support?

2. What could you use to trigger reminiscence?
3. How can you find out information about the older person that will assist you to reminiscence with them? What might you observe? Who could you speak to?

If you intend to use simple reminiscence, you may need to plan your visit and take resources with you.

4. What are some of the resources you can use to trigger reminiscence with older people in residential or community settings?
Sometimes volunteers might not use reminiscence because they are concerned that it may upset the older person they are supporting.

5. What would you do if the older person you were reminiscing with became upset? How would this impact future reminiscence activities with this older person?

Once complete, your facilitator will discuss your group’s responses.

Further reading

If you would like to find out more information about simple reminiscence or other interventions that are effective for older people, you can download beyondblue’s *What works to promote emotional wellbeing in older people* booklet, available at [www.beyondblue.org.au/resources](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/resources).

Alzheimers Australia also provides information on reminiscence which may be useful. Go to [www.fightdementia.org.au](http://www.fightdementia.org.au) and search for reminiscence.
We have just explored one strategy that can be effective in boosting the mental health and wellbeing of older people.

Now we are going to focus on treatments for anxiety and depression in older people.

Normally, when we think of treatments for people with anxiety and depression, we might first think of medical treatments such as medications. However, treatment for anxiety and depression at any age will involve a combination of:

- psychological treatment – including cognitive behaviour therapy (sometimes referred to as the talking therapy)
- medical treatments – such as antidepressant medications
- lifestyle – including exercise.

Treatments and recovery in older people can be just as effective as in younger people.

Did you know?
Older people’s use of mental health services is approximately half that of the general population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Older adults</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General population</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Further reading
For more information on treatment of anxiety and depression, access the following resources at www.beyondblue.org.au/resources

A guide to what works for depression

A guide to what works for anxiety

Connections matter: Helping older people stay socially active

Congratulations – you have now completed the beyondblue volunteer program. We hope that you will be able to apply the strategies learned in this program to continue enriching the lives of older people you support.

References
Where to find more information

**beyondblue**  
www.beyondblue.org.au  
Learn more about anxiety, depression and suicide prevention, or talk through your concerns with our Support Service. Our trained mental health professionals will listen, provide information, advice and brief counselling, and point you in the right direction so you can seek further support.

**1300 22 4636**  
Email or chat to us online at www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

**Head to Health**  
headtohealth.gov.au  
Head to Health can help you find free and low-cost, trusted online and phone mental health resources.

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