



Eating With Friends Project

Background and Benefits

What is EWF about?

Eating With Friends is a Tasmania wide social eating program. EWF is about bringing people together for a nutritious meal and making new friends. It is about reducing social isolation, improving wellbeing and building community capacity. It's about working with communities and volunteer groups to organise and run regular group meals.

There is no fixed format on how an EWF group should be run. EWF groups have a community development focus, with groups being run by a local community for their community, with each addressing their own needs, utilising available resources and strengths.

History:

EWF groups have been operating for 14 years. The social eating concept grew out of concern from Meals on Wheels volunteers that so many older people were eating alone. A working party was formed, made up of community workers and volunteers, to look at ways to bring socially isolated older people together to share a meal and to enjoy the company of others. A pilot group was set up in 2000 in West Moonah. That original group still operates, with a total of 37 EWF groups currently being run by different community groups and organisations around the state. Individual groups do not receive funding, operating on a cost-recovery basis, and driven by volunteers and community partnerships.

Core Values of EWF:

Seven core values were developed as guiding principles for all groups to work by. They are:

1. provide low cost, varied & nutritious meals
2. encourage a culture of inclusiveness where everyone is welcome
3. target those with limited socialisation opportunities
4. focus on local community resources
5. provide opportunity for volunteer involvement
6. respond to the needs of the local community
7. ensure appropriate access is provided



Benefits of Social Eating:

The social aspects of meal times have been identified as an integral part of the eating process. Eating as a social activity is a way of connecting and interacting with other people. Social isolation, which is the lived experience of many older people, is identified as a factor that interferes with their ability to eat well. Individuals may lose interest in preparing or eating regular meals alone. The social experience around meal times makes a big difference to appetites.



In the World Health Organisation's report *Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts (2003)* social engagement is recognised as a strong health determinant: "friendship, good social relations and strong supportive networks improve health....social support helps give people the emotional and practical resources they need. Belonging to a social network makes people feel cared for, loved, esteemed and valued. This belonging has a powerful protective effect on health."



Some identified outcomes from the Eating With Friends Project Evaluation, conducted by Community Focus in 2008 are: people's involvement lead to a more positive outlook and increased motivation to eat regular and varied meals; friendships developed and social contacts happen outside the arranged meal times; the meals provide not only good nutrition, but a chance to socialise - a key factor in preventing the adverse nutritional effects of social isolation.



Research:

Research conducted by the University Department of Rural Health (UDRH) UTAS in 2007 explored challenges facing older rural people in staying socially connected. The study looked at current social eating models, including EWF groups, and the results show there are benefits to getting people together to share meals in a social setting.

Research participants drew a distinction between food and eating. Food is food, whereas eating involves others - it implies company and some sort of social interaction. They clearly identified that eating with others was much more enjoyable than eating alone, and Eating With Friends provided them with invaluable social interaction and, almost as an aside, the group also happened to provide a meal. It was the access to other people and the anticipation of time shared that enhanced the eating experience. While eating in company, older people reported that they eat more broadly and more varied foods than they would have at home alone, thereby improving their nutritional intake. The research indicates that any meal program needs to recognise the social aspect of meals as essential - which is what Eating With Friends does!



Participants constantly gave social explanations for their use of EWF services: *it's a good way to meet people ... it's the friendships ... the company ... getting out of the house ... to chat to people and find out what they are doing ... to hear lots of voices ... to laugh ...*

Further research conducted by UDRH in 2013 looked specifically at the EWF program and posed the question - *EWF: Is it addressing social eating needs of older Tasmanians?* A sample number of participants were interviewed and the study findings returned a resounding yes to the research question. The EWF model has within its quite simple premise of providing opportunities for older people to come together to share in a meal and social interaction, sufficient flexibility to allow groups to evolve in ways to fit their own particular needs. Groups are as notable for their individuality as for what they share in common.

EWF Project:

The EWF Project is auspiced by the Tasmanian Association of Community Houses (TACH) and has a reference group made up of community partners to guide the Project. The EWF Project has received recurrent HACC funding since 2008. Funding at present is split 70%/30% between the commonwealth and state HACC programs.

The funding supports the employment of a state-wide Project Coordinator whose role is to support and network the existing EWF groups, to assist them to overcome barriers or manage difficulties so they can continue to operate, such as the new Work, Health & Safety laws. The role also involves assisting communities to establish new groups.

The EWF social eating program generates high social returns for a nominal government financial investment, and advocates for EWF look forward to its continued development and support well into the future.

"One of the delights of life is eating with friends, second to that is talking about eating. And, for an unsurpassed double whammy, there is talking about eating while you are eating with friends."

Laurie Colwin *Home Cooking: A Writer in the Kitchen* Harper Collins 1987

