

# Social Prescribing



## What is social prescribing?

Social prescribing is a person-centred health care approach that involves prescribing non-medical interventions or activities with the hope of improving their overall well-being. Rather than relying solely on traditional medical treatments, it connects people with community resources and support networks such as social activities, art classes and exercise programs. This will promote social connection while helping to improve a person's physical and mental health. This approach recognises many health conditions are interconnected and seeks to address the underlying determinants of health. The goal is to empower people to take a preventative or early intervention approach to their health and well-being. They can engage and connect with programs that provide support and social connection and ultimately build on protective factors to prevent mental health disorders occurring.

## Benefits of social prescribing

There are a wide range of positive outcomes such as social connection, reduction in loneliness and the reduction in medical, physical and mental health conditions. The outcomes vary depending on the person, the services and activities they engage in as well as their willingness to participate. Exploring the option of social prescribing for residents of the Loddon Mallee region of Victoria aligns with the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan. A place-based approach could reduce the prevalence of mental illness and increase resilience amongst communities. It could reduce the gap in social and emotional wellbeing for at-risk groups with an emphasis on the lonely. This will ultimately reduce the occurrence of suicide deaths, suicidal ideation and suicide attempt for the vulnerable population [1]

# Social prescribing can provide:

- activities that make people feel included (physical activity and exercise, art, creative, nature or group activities, Men's Sheds, volunteering)
- activities that increase social connection and make people happier
- a way of meeting new people and making friends.

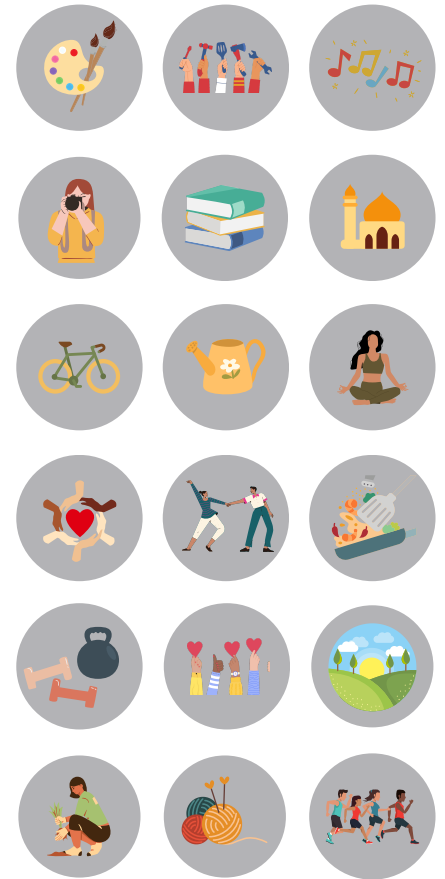
*Do people know what's happening in the local community?*

*Do people know where the group activities and classes are happening in their community?*

Mental wellbeing activities cross over with other sub-regional health priorities.

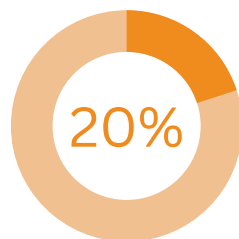
- **Healthy eating** – incorporating community gardens, community lunches and other healthy eating initiatives.
- **Active living** – incorporating walking, yoga, dance and exercise groups.

Planned activities addressing these other health priorities result in improving social connection, building social engagement and growth. They can become activities of social prescribing as they address mental wellbeing need and provide positive overall health outcomes.



## What's happening in our region?

It is suggested approximately 20% of patients consult their General Practitioner (GP) for what are primarily social problems [2].



This could provide the opportunity for social prescribing. For many communities, the services and activities are already established and could potentially be provided at a relatively low cost, allowing for long-term saving [3].

## What's happening next?

The second round of new Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals are planned to open at the end of 2023. In the Loddon Mallee region this includes the City of Mildura and City of Greater Bendigo, Loddon Shire and Campaspe Shire [6]. These services will provide community-based models of care and support to people close to home.

## Royal Commission recommendations

Social prescribing initiatives and services will be provided by the new Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals being gradually rolled out in Victorian communities as part of the Mental Health Reforms. They will be known as the Local Service, and will provide free support to people without the need for a referral. It will allow people to engage in non-clinical community-based activities to reduce loneliness and social isolation[4].

The Local Connections, social prescribing services, have been co-designed by people with lived and living experience including carers, families and supporters[5].

# Establishing a community social prescribing program

It requires careful preparation and planning, collaboration and ongoing commitment from the healthcare providers, community organisations and policy makers. Several key steps and components are involved in the planning and process stages based on models and pilot programs.

## To establish a program and make it sustainable

- 1 Conduct a place-based needs assessment of the community and look where existing systems aren't meeting the health and social needs of the community, particularly in priority groups.
- 2 Collaborate with the community and various stakeholders in the planning process. This is essential to ensure success and subsequent ownership of a social prescribing program.
- 3 Provide training, education and capacity building opportunities for health care providers, non-health care providers, social prescribers, support staff and volunteers
- 4 Establish referral pathways and criteria to participate in the program and information systems to manage this. Ensure it is a simple process so it will not create extra work or be a barrier to enrolling individuals.
- 5 Build and maintain up-to-date service directories of social prescribing practitioners, organisations, support groups and social services.
- 6 Provide community outreach and promote the social prescribing program to increase awareness and encourage participation.
- 7 Assessment of a person's specific needs and goals (currently the role of the GP in the primary care setting), followed by the development of the social prescription.
- 8 Utilise a referral to a link worker/community connector where available to further discuss interests and needs, capabilities to participate in activities and support when engaging.
- 9 Provide adequate time to engage in the activity, with the support of the link worker/community connector assisting or providing support if required.
- 10 Opportunity for the individual to follow up with the GP to provide feedback, modify and adjust the prescription if required. With consent, data should be collected on participant satisfaction, outcomes, barriers etc. to the program.
- 11 Evaluate social prescribing program and the satisfaction of the participants when exploring funding options to continue the program.

# Current programs or past trials of social prescribing

[Get Connected with Social Prescribing Mount Alexander](#)  
[The City of Greater Bendigo Social Prescribing](#)  
[Campaspe Regional Library Social Prescribing](#)  
[Living Our Best Life Project - City of Knox](#)

The Murray PHN have completed the City of Greater Bendigo social prescribing initiative in June 2023 and are awaiting the evaluation findings. They have also completed a comprehensive scoping of the Mallee region to determine level of interest and support for future social prescribing programs.

## Who can access social prescribing?

- Individuals who want to improve their mental wellbeing or their carers, family members or supporters to reduce stigma and isolation.
- People who become isolated due to chronic physical health conditions or experience difficulty navigating the health system due to cost and lack of transport.
- People experiencing social isolation who are vulnerable and require assistance with social connection such as volunteering or joining a group.
- Older people experiencing loneliness and loss of social connection due to life events, chronic conditions and decreasing independence.

With the establishment of the new Local Services, those receiving care and support can self-refer or be referred to a Local Connection service if they are aged 26 and over and are clients, carers, family members or supporters [7].

In community settings, there can be a range of formal and informal referral pathways to social prescribing. It can begin with the GP and individual together discussing and identifying their social needs before they determine if a formal or informal referral is necessary.

A formal referral uses a social prescribing prescription and involves a trained link worker or community connector. They work with an individual to identify their priorities and personalise a range of local non-clinical community services to provide support.

An informal referral involves a GP or Health Professional referring their patients directly to an activity. Individual programs may include criteria such as age, medical and non-medical history and physical ability to participate.

## How to access mental health and wellbeing support

- Individuals can begin the discussion with their GP, identifying their goals and making a plan. The GP can then discuss what options are available in their local community. Alternatively, an individual can self-refer for free Mental Health and Wellbeing support through a Local Service if they are 26 years and over by contacting the free number:



Contact no. 1300 375 330

[1] Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2019 – 2023 : <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/victorian-public-health-and-wellbeing-plan-2019-2023>

[2] Social Prescribing could help alleviate pressure on GP's: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.i1436>

[3] A Toolkit on How To Implement Social Prescribing: <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/354456/9789290619765-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

[4] Local adult and older adult mental health and wellbeing services: [Local adult and older adult mental health and wellbeing services](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/health-services/local-adult-and-older-adult-mental-health-and-wellbeing-services) | [health.vic.gov.au](https://www.health.vic.gov.au)

[5] Local Connections – A social prescribing initiative fact sheet: <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-09/factsheet-local-connections-a-social-prescribing-initiative.docx>

[6] Next tranche of Mental Health and Wellbeing Local providers announced: <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/news/next-tranche-of-mental-health-and-wellbeing-local-providers-announced>

[7] Local Connections – A social prescribing initiative fact sheet: <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-09/factsheet-local-connections-a-social-prescribing-initiative.docx>