



The Humanitas Rotterdam 'Social isolation of older people' Project

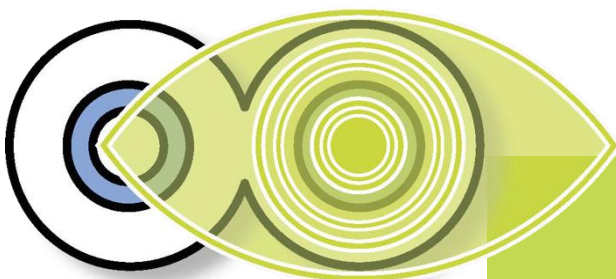
Good practice on optimising caregiving skills and competences

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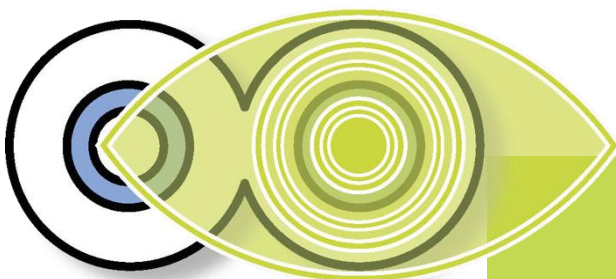
1. Introduction: the ‘Seniors Project’

Humanitas is a Dutch non-religious volunteer organisation that was founded after World War II to support vulnerable people in society. As a spin-off from this national organisation Humanitas Rotterdam (HR) is an independent foundation that focuses on the well-being of the population of the Rotterdam region in the Netherlands. The mission of Humanitas Rotterdam is to aid (vulnerable) people to live their life in their way, focusing on the joy of life and happiness (Year report, 2020). To that end, it offers an ample supply of products and services in four professional fields: residential care, home care, social work, and medical and paramedical care. Its vision of help is based on a humanistic philosophy, putting four values at centre stage: autonomy (directing your own life), self-reliance of clients (support is additional), involvement of a personal and professional care community, and a mindset of thinking in (individual) possibilities. Humanitas Rotterdam employs more than 1400 employees and assigns an important role to volunteers in line with its roots. Many hundreds of volunteers are active, particularly in the care of older people and social work.

The SEE ME good practice project is situated within this domain and concerns the extramural project ‘Preventing and combatting social isolation of older people’, or ‘seniors project’ for short. Older adults are one of the target groups of Humanitas Rotterdam, and this program focuses on activities that counter their isolation and loneliness (Grant proposal, 2021). The project is managed and guided by some professionals but largely run by volunteers. At the moment, HR has registered about 2000 volunteers. These volunteers are active in different functions and elements of the organisation.

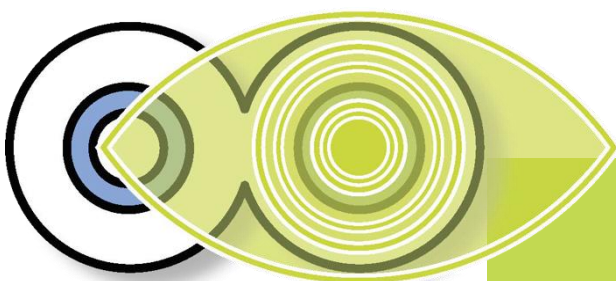
In this study, several sources are used to depict the program and its operational mechanisms. To start with, substantial information was obtained from different kinds of documentation, like Humanitas Rotterdam year reports, the organisation's website and the organisation's grant proposal for this specific seniors’ project. Second, six in-depth interviews were held as part of the overall SEE ME project and were scrutinised for relevant information about the good practice project. The SEE ME interview topic lists are related to three themes:

- a) meaning needs, social needs, talents and dreams;
- b) competences and skills of caregivers; and
- c) additional good practice specifics.



Interviews were held with three older adults (two women, one male; 71, 72, 91 years old; one with a migration background; all living alone), a volunteer (male, 58 years old), an informal carer (woman of 87 years, who cares for her 86 years old husband) and a professional carer (60 years old female social worker at HR). All respondents were purposefully selected from the good practice project to provide insight into how the target group of seniors experienced the project, how volunteers and informal and professional caregivers performed their tasks and what they needed for that. Third, additional information was gained informally through visiting HR, witnessing organised activities (e.g., a ball game for older adults) and informal talks with HR professionals.

This study is mainly based on documents and interviews, whereas informal sources were mainly used to supplement information and/or to check its accuracy.



2. The 'best practice program'

The aims of the Seniors Project

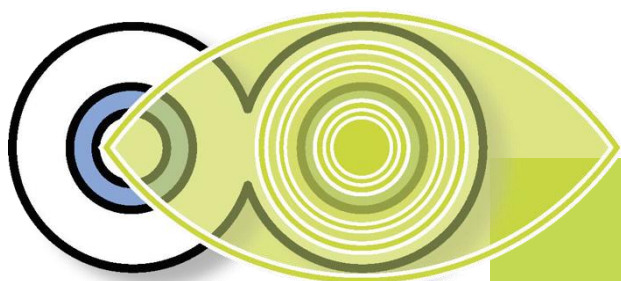
The program works from the assumption that customisation – tailoring care to the individual - is needed because there is no standard solution for loneliness or social isolation. This reasoning is one of the motivations to include Humanitas Rotterdam in the research project SEE ME. Customization means that Humanitas Rotterdam works with many different interventions to encourage meeting people and physical movement. This policy to customize care was also translated in Humanitas Rotterdam, going the extra mile during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the seniors' program, additional efforts were made to find activities that were still possible during this pandemic, like organizing telephone calls with the older adults and organizing "having a cup of coffee in front of your door" (Year Report 2020, p. 4). A group of 57 people, aside from the fixed group of volunteers, was added to the team of callers that have been calling older adults during the pandemic.

The official aims of the Seniors Program are (Grant proposal, 2021, p. 3, translated from Dutch):

- Prevention - or reduction of the risk - of social isolation of older adults living in the municipality of Rotterdam, who are not yet socially isolated but are hindered by feelings of loneliness;
- Reduction or elimination of social isolation of older adults living in the municipality of Rotterdam who are already in social isolation.

Target group and enrolment

Thus, the target group is characterised by older adults living in the municipality of Rotterdam who are (at risk of being) socially isolated and suffering from loneliness but (might) want to participate more in society or learn how to participate in society again. It concerns an extramural group of seniors that is used to being on their own, often being at home all day. Many of them have difficulties that grew larger and in the long, run became too complicated to handle. Also, people with minor dementia or minor psychiatric problems fall under the target group. However, in case of a severe health diagnosis people are excluded from the Seniors project. They would put a too heavy demand on the volunteers of HR, whose task is to address loneliness, being present and listening to what people want to say.



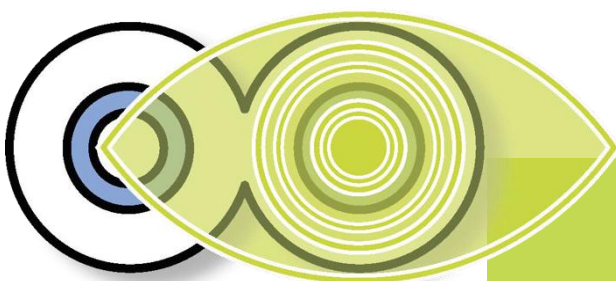
The older adults find their way towards Humanitas Rotterdam through many sorts of referrals: through advisors from welfare organisations, general practitioners, family, neighbours or through district teams of Humanitas Rotterdam. When a new referral is coming in, an HR professional gets in touch with the older adult and visits this person at home to judge whether this person fits the Seniors project. The professional deems these visits to be important for a proper judgment since – given the privacy rules – HR receives little background information beforehand. Furthermore, the professional states that even with a certain diagnosis or a specific health condition, the person's suitability to join the project differs per individual.

It sometimes takes a while before the senior trusts the organisation enough to accept help. HR tries to win their trust by regularly calling to keep in contact and not imposing any expectations on the older person (Grant proposal, 2021, p. 4, translated from Dutch). If an older person is mobile and able to join an activity, HR invites them to their next organized activity. When seniors are not able to leave their houses anymore, HR will visit them for an intake session in which also the social network resources of the older adult are explored.

Project activities

To reach its aims, the Seniors Project includes a large number of interventions, which can be grouped into four main categories.

- 1) Programs for connecting volunteers to older adults on an individual basis. This is a central activity that is carried out in three different ways, in order to, respectively:
 - a. Activate and assist the older adult for one year to start engaging in new activities, thereby rebuilding their social network.
 - b. Visit an older adult to just be present and listen, thereby reducing feelings of loneliness and social isolation. This intervention is aimed towards the oldest adults with limited social networks, who are no longer able to rebuild these networks. It also prevents the awkward situation of people dying alone and being deceased for weeks without being noticed.
 - c. Connect a student or younger person to an older adult to create opportunities for intergenerational learning.



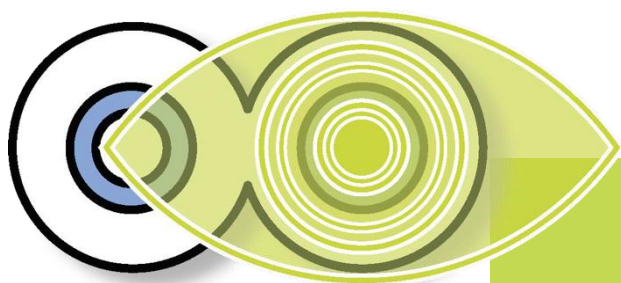
- 2) Activities that aim to facilitate encounters between older adults may lead to enduring contact. The underlying goal of these activities is that participants will exchange phone numbers and meet each other outside of Humanitas Rotterdam during the encounters. This concerns activity like:
 - a. 'Pleasureful Ageing days', meetings organized by volunteers mostly on Wednesday and Sunday (which is experienced as a difficult day by the target group).
 - b. Exercises such as Qigong and 'Koersbal' (similar to 'jeu de boules'). During the pandemic the Qigong coach organized online sessions and participants of the 'Koersbal' group encouraged each other to get together for walks.
 - c. Support group meetings regarding mourning and other themes related to existential issues and meaning in life.

- 3) Interventions that are focused on discovering talents and competences of older people: concerning issues that participants had valued in their past or detecting new matters of which they had not thought of yet. In this line, the 'talent scan' method seeks to discover what these seniors may mean for society and how their talents may be used.

- 4) Several kinds of 'reaching out' activities of Humanitas Rotterdam that aim to keep in touch with their target group in situations when live contact is limited. Like:
 - a. Calling older adults who are not able or not willing to join activities organized by HR and who are not coupled to a volunteer. Older people who regularly get a call from HR highly appreciate this.
 - b. Sending a postcard for someone's birthday or when one has been gravely ill or been lying in the hospital. A few times, during the pandemic, HR sent letters to their target group, whereas older adults appreciate it to get personal letters.
 - c. Bringing a little present during the pandemic to older adults involved in Humanitas Rotterdam.

Caregiver role, training and supervision: volunteers at centre stage

From the start, it has been noticed that volunteers form the core of the Seniors project. As the organisation states: "Naturally, volunteers are part of the lives of the people they support, and they are part of the organisation itself. Volunteer work is therefore not something we do as an "add on", but it is an important pillar in our joint endeavour towards the quality of life for our clients" (Grant proposal, 2021, p. 2, translated from Dutch).



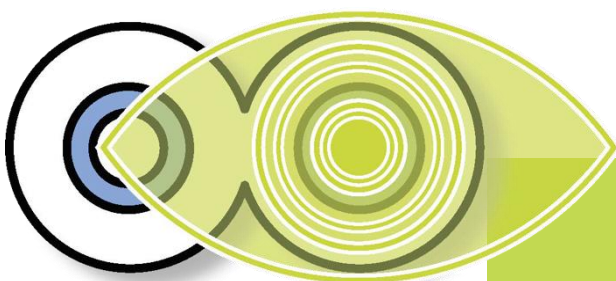
An important element of HR's volunteer strategy is binding their volunteers to the organisation. A trend among volunteers is to stay for a short while only, HR recognises. When it comes to projects with older adults, short-term involvement doesn't work, given the special importance for this target group of building and maintaining trust. Therefore, HR aims to tie their volunteers to their organisation and engage them for more extended periods by providing tasks that fit the volunteers' wishes and capabilities and sustaining them professionally.

Humanitas Rotterdam has an official volunteer policy, which assures that volunteers get professional support. When volunteers come in, HR conducts an extensive intake interview that focuses on their competences. Before they start working, they obtain training that focuses on the values of HR, on demarcating the tasks of volunteer work, the rights and duties of volunteers, how to communicate with their clients and the like. During their work with older adults, HR offers them intervision meetings that deal with topics such as how to recognize and guard your boundaries and how to say goodbye to your clients. They also get special attention when the older adult they visit or call has been hospitalized or has died. Furthermore, HR offers their volunteers in the seniors project a course on dementia.

Also, volunteers may join training and workshops that are offered by the (national) Humanitas Academy (<https://www.humanitas.nl/academie/>) in which Humanitas Rotterdam participates. These are trainings and workshops that aim at:

- Expanding the volunteers' knowledge about their tasks;
- Conveying and practising skills, such as conversation skills, how to provide support without taking over control, how to behave during home visits;
- Becoming aware of the proper attitude of a volunteer (i.e.: demand-oriented, focused on equality and trust, having attention and being involved, enhancing the strengths of the client).

The professionals who supervise the volunteers in their work guide them during their volunteer work and look after their personal development. According to the 'HR volunteer policy' every volunteer should have a personal, evaluative talk with the HR coordinator at least once a year. Moreover, fixed moments are set for an evaluative conversation after the volunteer's four weeks trial period and – as an exit talk - when volunteers end their volunteer work and leave HR.



3. Evaluation and analysis

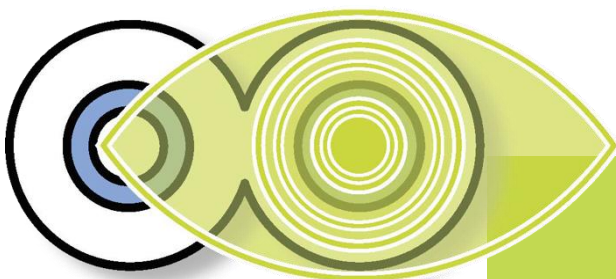
Innovative principles of the Seniors project

One of the main factors that make this project a success is that the seniors involved in the project feel seen by the people from Humanitas Rotterdam. This makes them feel connected to the organisation. To them HR is more than an organisation that organizes activities, they feel included by the organisation and they sense that HR cares for them. A client states that HR has *“plenty of attention for us older people, whoever you are, ... Humanitas knows them very well”*. According to the respondents, this personal attention is what distinguishes HR from other organisations. This is expressed in the way respondents would be recognised on the street by someone from Humanitas, how people from Humanitas call you up sometimes, how HR staff receive clients and guide them to the building when they come to visit or wait for them at the bus stop.

As a professional caregiver states, one of the core aspects of the project is that in everything that HR does, it seeks to give people the feeling that they are being cared for, that they feel at home and are welcome. The Seniors project offers warmth and attention.

The feeling of belonging that clients have, and the feeling of equality, also appears in the importance that they attach to a reciprocal relationship. One of the older adults described, how she initiated a craft project to make something as a way of saying thank you to the people of HR. Similarly, another senior found it important to return the attentiveness and humanity that HR shows him, which gives him a reason to turn up at the activities they organize. Reciprocity in their relationship with HR is felt like a very important quality.

An important *organisational factor* that made the Seniors Project a success is the way the organisation takes an extra step when it comes to organizing activities for older adults. Instead of accepting that their activities would come to a halt during the pandemic, they made sure that they stayed connected to the people involved with their organisation. As depicted above, HR called them regularly sent a postcard, letter, or a small gift. Thus always tailoring care to the situation and looking for possibilities to lift limitations. In the words of a volunteer caregiver, HR is always thinking about what they can organize and which projects they can start up, despite all the financial struggles and rules. They keep trying to organize activities to keep people busy and keep them in contact with others. A further important factor that drives this project is that volunteers are embedded in HR and not seen as an extra, but as core to the project. They are carefully



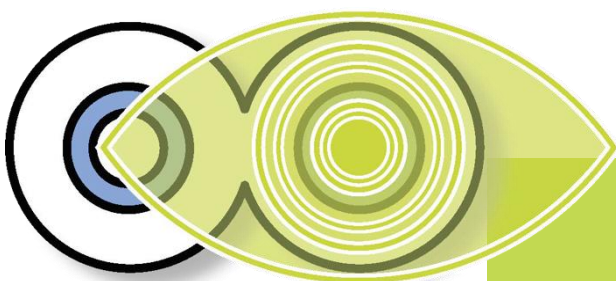
selected, introduced into the organisation, and assisted through guiding and training. With this, they are not just set to work, but educated in the core values of HR, which stress customisation, individual attention, respect and equality.

Required competencies of the caregiver

Taking all together - the HR policy, project activities and stories of respondents - the competencies that are essential to provide this customised, attentive care can be summarized at two levels. First, as basic competences for all caregivers - whether volunteer, informal or professional – it is in particular important that caregivers have well-developed communicative abilities, have an empathic attitude and can place themselves in someone else's shoes. Related to this, relational capabilities are important, in building optimal rapport with each client. Furthermore, one must be able to observe clients well and be capable to signal what is going on. According to the professional caregiver, these competencies can all be learned and trained in a care setting.

Second, at the level of professional care, some additional competencies come to the fore. To start with, it is self-evident that the relational capabilities of professionals are equally important in the contact with their volunteers and informal caregivers. In particular, when hiring a volunteer, it is important to strike the right tone during an intake session to assess whether this candidate could be a good volunteer. Retrieving the right information during this talk is essential to make this judgement.

For professionals in the Seniors Project, two other capabilities stand out. One is being able to maintain contact with other (health and social work) disciplines to provide the best help possible. If an older adult has a complicated health background, professionals from other disciplines are needed to respond to that. To call on these disciplines, one needs to know the field of medical and social services well. Also, one must be convincing towards them to get your points across. A related capability that the professional needs is intervention ability. During an intake with an older adult – or at a later moment in time - one must be able to assess whether Humanitas Rotterdam is the proper organisation for this person or whether another organisation might fit better. Referring clients to other organisations is an important part of the work.



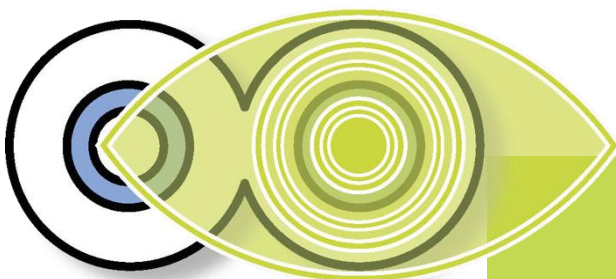
Sustaining effective project mechanisms in the care organisation

Humanitas Rotterdam appears to have an explicit care vision that stresses the client's autonomy and self-reliance and focuses on thinking in possibilities and the involvement of the personal and professional community. A core asset of HR is that these values are taken very seriously. They are translated into the guidance and education of (volunteer) staff and are clearly visible in the attitudes of the caregivers. Also, it appears that the Seniors Project activities are explicitly seen not as an end in itself, but as a means to enhance the strength of the seniors and to sustain their social connections and feelings of belonging. Thus, the activities are well related to the care vision and project aims.

Recapping the mechanisms that make the Seniors project work in combatting loneliness and social isolation, we may list the following:

- 1) Providing *abundant personal*, respectful attention to clients;
- 2) Providing help only to *sustain the client's strength* in taking care of themselves;
- 3) Organizing *low-profile activities as a means* to enhance social contacts;
- 4) Creating a *caring community of reciprocal* personal and professional relationships that gives clients a feeling of belonging;
- 5) Practising an *active role of HR staff* in lifting limitations and thinking out of the box, by which they keep the seniors connected to HR;
- 6) Employing a great number of *volunteers*, ensuring frequent, individual moments of personal contact;
- 7) *Educating* and guiding volunteers (and staff) to practice the *care values* that HR adheres to.

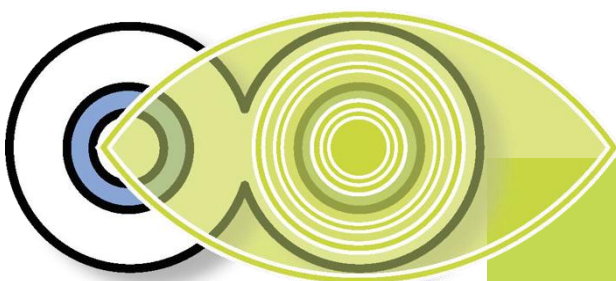
By working by the core values, translating them into activities and hiring and training staff that embrace and internalise these values, these effective care mechanisms of the Seniors project seem to be deeply embedded in the HR organisation.



4. Conclusion

The Seniors project of Humanitas Rotterdam consists of a broad range of interventions aimed to prevent or reduce the social isolation and loneliness of older adults living in the municipality. In line with the HR mission - to assist people in living their life in their way and to focus on the joy of life and happiness - the project foremost seeks to support and facilitate the strengths of older adults through personal attention. The main program consists of connecting volunteers for a longer period as buddies to older adults, facilitating encounters between the seniors that may lead to enduring contacts, activities to (re)discover talents and competences of the older adults, and pursuing 'reaching out' activities to keep in touch with the target group in difficult times.

The foremost effective mechanism of the Seniors project appears to be that it extensively customises its care to the individual older adult, by giving priority to personal attention and a family-like, warm community. This endeavour is reflected in how the project approach takes the older adults as they are and enables social contacts and assistance in a natural, individual way. Innovative is how both professional and volunteer caregivers operate in a low-profile manner, not forcing programs but putting human attentiveness first by far. The project caregivers seem to be easily accessible, sympathetic, and helpful as good friends or acquaintances - as if they live together with the older adults in the same, small village. The organisational side that makes this possible is the relative lack of hierarchy, its accessibility, and its never-lasting effort to stay in touch with the seniors and let them feel that they belong to the HR community. One crucial aspect of this is that volunteers and staff are trained and guided to fit the HR concept of care: being equal, respecting the seniors, paying personal attention, and not imposing any measures but just being benevolent and helpful.





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