



HEALTHIER, LONGER,  
BETTER LIVES

# COMMUNITY AT WORK

A study exploring the impact of social connections  
on employees and the workplace.

August 2023



## Project team



### Nicholas Epley

Nicholas Epley is the John Templeton Keller Distinguished Service Professor of Behavioral Science, and Director of the Roman Family Center for Decision Research, at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. He studies social cognition—how thinking people think about other thinking people—to understand why smart people so routinely misunderstand each other. He teaches an ethics and happiness course to MBA students called Designing a Good Life. His research has appeared in more than two dozen empirical journals, been featured by the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, CNN, Wired, and National Public Radio, among many others, and has been funded by the National Science Foundation and the Templeton Foundation. He has been awarded the 2008 Theoretical Innovation Award from the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, the 2011 Distinguished Scientific Award for Early Career Contribution to Psychology from the American Psychological Association, the 2015 Book Prize for the Promotion of Social and Personality Science, and the 2018 Career Trajectory Award from the Society for Experimental Social Psychology. He is the author of *Mindwise: How We Understand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want*.



### Alison McLean

Alison McLean is the General Manager of Shared Value Partnerships at AIA Australia ('AIA'). Her Team develops innovative wellbeing solutions that deliver Shared Value for customers, society, and AIA. The team's solutions are behavioural science and analytics driven and developed in collaboration with our partners – academics, start-ups, and healthcare providers - who share our focus on social impact.

Alison has worked for the past 10 years in the field of Behavioural Science. In 2020 she established the team at AIA Australia with a focus on health and finance decision-making and underlying behavioural science.

Alison is a clinically trained economist who has completed a Master of Science in Health Economics, Policy and Management (London School of Economics), holds a Master of Health Science in Health and Environment (Queensland University of Technology) and a Bachelor of Health Science Occupational Therapy (University of Newcastle, Australia).



### Adeline Goh

Adeline Goh is a Senior Manager of Behavioural Science at AIA Australia. She holds a Master of Science in Behavioural Science (London School of Economics) and a Bachelor of Science with Honours in Psychology (University of Western Australia).

Adeline leads the Behavioural Science team to drive behavioural research and apply insights focused on improving health and financial decision-making, behaviour change, and wellbeing outcomes. She has extensive experience developing, managing, and delivering projects in collaboration with business stakeholders, research institutions and strategic partners.

Adeline also manages a number of AIA's academic research partnerships aimed at improving our understanding of societal issues and developing sustainable and scalable solutions across insurance, health, and wellbeing.

## Background

Loneliness reflects negative feelings people have about their level of connection with others. Loneliness is very common, with a report from Ending Loneliness Together indicating that approximately one-third of Australians reported being lonely in 2022. This is an important issue because there is now strong evidence that loneliness is associated with poorer physical and psychological outcomes, including mental illness and premature death. Loneliness can also manifest in ways that are destructive to organisations, including reduced job satisfaction, more absenteeism and

presenteeism, reduced productivity and increased work-cover claims. Given the number of hours that the average Australian spends at work, workplaces have been identified as an ideal setting for health promotion, intervention and for cultivating meaningful interpersonal relationships. Leaders who promote a supportive work environment that fosters connection between people will be better placed to reduce the burden of loneliness on their people and the subsequent impact on business performance.

### The impact and associations between loneliness and wellbeing



## Our commitment to Shared Value

As a life and health insurer, AIA Australia ('AIA') is passionate about increasing health awareness and supporting prevention-based activities so that Australians can live healthier, longer, better lives. We believe that conducting research and sharing insights through thought leadership are important contributions we can make to help address societal issues, such as loneliness, that impact health and wellbeing.

Guided by our 'Shared Value' principles, our Behavioural Science team led a research collaboration to tackle the issue of loneliness with Professor Nicholas Epley, the John Templeton Keller Professor of Behavioural Science and Faculty Director of the Centre for Decision Research at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business ('Chicago Booth').

## The social study

AIA and Chicago Booth ran a social study with AIA employees to better understand the impact of social connections on employees and the workplace. Employees were assigned into either a 'Coffee Card' or 'Coffee Only' group. All participants enjoyed free barista coffees in the office for one month, however, those in the Coffee Card group were given conversation cards and encouraged to be social. Both groups completed measures of loneliness, subjective happiness, life satisfaction, depression, organisational commitment, engagement at work, and job satisfaction over four months.

Interestingly, the results for both groups were encouraging as it was observed that many Coffee Only group members organically became more social in the presence of others.



# The learnings

- **EXPECTATIONS VS EXPERIENCES:**

Participants in both groups expected the social interactions to be more awkward than they actually turned out to be, with this difference being greater for the Coffee Card group. Both groups adjusted their expectations over time as they learnt that the coffee breaks were less awkward than they had expected.

- **ENJOYMENT:**

Participants in both groups reported high levels of enjoyment following the coffee breaks (e.g., through actively engaging in deeper conversations or being in the presence of other people), with their expectation of enjoyment increasing each week.

- **WELLBEING OUTCOMES:**

Participants in both groups reported feeling less lonely and slightly happier at the end of the four-month study. Small but encouraging improvements in depression and life satisfaction scores were also evident.

- **SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AT WORK:**

Participants in both groups reported having more connections and friends at work, with the number of connections being higher among the Coffee Card group.

- **ABSENTEEISM:**

Participants in both groups reported having slightly fewer sick days at the end of the study than they had reported at the start of the study.



## The call to action

### FOR LEADERS:

Creating spaces and opportunities for your employees to connect with one another outside of their day-to-day work may promote healthier outcomes. We have found some evidence that encouraging people to be social over a coffee (or simply being around other people in the same space) can have a positive impact.

### FOR INDIVIDUALS:

Be brave with your social interactions and you will likely find that talking to other people is more enjoyable (and less awkward) than you think. Simply saying hello to someone may result in new connections and lead to new friendships.

For more information regarding the Social Connection Research, please contact Alison McLean, General Manager of Shared Value Partnerships, AIA Australia on [au.wellbeingprograms@aia.com](mailto:au.wellbeingprograms@aia.com)

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