



HEALTHIER, LONGER,  
BETTER LIVES

# THE POWER OF SOCIAL CONNECTION

And its importance for mental wellbeing



# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
What is social connection?	4
Where we connect	4
Social connection and wellbeing	4
COVID and social connection	4
Implications	4
Easy ways to connect	4
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Drivers of mental wellbeing</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The science of social connection</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>The impacts of the pandemic on social connection and mental wellbeing</b>	<b>8</b>
Work impacts	8
Children and young people	8
Loneliness	8
<b>Management of mental health during the pandemic</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Success stories</b>	<b>11</b>
Danny Frawley Centre for Health and Wellbeing – Powered by AIA Vitality	11
AIA Vitality Mental Fitness Benefit	11
Togetherall	12
Spuds Game – Time 2 Talk	12
Virtual Psychologist	12
Victorian Government	12
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>14</b>

# Foreword

**I have no doubt about the roles that strong social relationships and connecting with those around us play in our health and wellbeing.**

As the CEO of more than 2,000 Australian employees, I have seen the impact that moving to a remote working environment has had on people's stress levels; the sense of community that you can enjoy in the workplace has been more difficult to achieve.

And as a major life and health insurer, our data has shown us the ongoing effects of the pandemic on mental wellbeing – in part, caused by ongoing lockdowns, isolation and other restrictions.

But there is an upside to this – knowing how important social connection is allows us to make an active effort to seek this out.

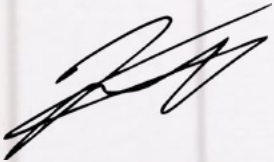
For me personally, catching up with friends for a game of footy or a gym session allows me to nurture both my mental and physical wellbeing at the same time.

Through our AIA Vitality program, we focus on encouraging people to take small steps to improve their own health and wellbeing, such as getting outside for a walk or taking part in a group fitness class - and our data shows the benefits that these activities can have.

We work with some incredible partner organisations that are focused on helping individuals and communities connect, in a way that really delivers shared value.

While I know that no one would want to repeat the past two years, they have given us a unique opportunity to consider the power of social connection and its importance for mental wellbeing.

With this knowledge, we can continue our work of helping Australians to live healthier, longer, better lives.



**Damien Mu**

CEO and Managing Director,  
AIA Australia and AIA Health Insurance





# Summary

## What is social connection?

Social connection is the experience of feeling close and a sense of belongingness with others.

Regardless of age, gender, culture, or economics, social connections are a fundamental human need.

## Where we connect

We feel socially connected to people we interact with in our daily lives, including family members, friends, colleagues, neighbours, and our broader community.

## Social connection and wellbeing

Social connection impacts mental wellbeing which impacts physical wellbeing.

The strength of connections affects a community's ability to thrive.

### Benefits

**Stronger social connection positively impacts our mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing:**

- Lower levels of anxiety and depression
- Higher self-esteem
- Greater empathy for others
- Strengthened immunity
- Increased longevity

### Risks

**Weaker social connection negatively impacts our mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing:**

- Increased anxiety and depression
- Poor mental health
- Unhealthy habits
- Increased mortality risk

Lack of social connection can be a greater risk to health than obesity, smoking and high blood pressure

## COVID and social connection

- Measures implemented to reduce the impact of the pandemic, like lockdowns, quarantine, physical distancing and masks, drastically changed how we connect with others
- Many Australians already struggled with poor mental wellbeing and feelings of loneliness prior to the pandemic
- COVID-19 exacerbated this crisis over 2020-2021 – less social connection led to feelings of loneliness and poor mental wellbeing
- 15 per cent reported feeling lonely
- 20 per cent experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress
- More than 600,000 Australians accessed virtual mental health services, including crisis support, counselling, forums and support programs.

## Implications

Like other modifiable factors, such as physical activity, eating habits and smoking, we can harness the power of social connection to promote health and wellbeing.

## Easy ways to connect

- Schedule time to catch up with family and friends. Pair it with a walk so you're fitting in more activity each week.
- Join a group of people with similar interests. Local councils often have details of interest groups and community activities.
- Get active by participating in a fitness group or playing sport.
- Offer to help somebody, or sign up to volunteer.
- Find out about activities in your community and get involved.

Tip: Try to connect outdoors (in green spaces) whenever possible.



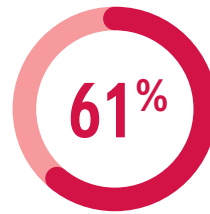
# Introduction

Prior to 2020, mental disorders were leading causes of the global health burden, with depressive and anxiety disorders being the major contributors.<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 has exacerbated this, with the number of people living with depressive and anxiety disorders increasing by more than a quarter in 2020.

Inevitably, COVID-19 radically shifted the daily life and working conditions of Australians by increasing job insecurity, financial strain, and isolation. This has amplified the already significant demand for mental health services, products, and solutions.<sup>2</sup> Since the pandemic, 61 per cent of Australians have taken actions to help manage their mental health with around 612,000 accessing these via phone or digital technologies.<sup>3</sup>

Understanding the drivers of mental wellbeing can help us to focus on measures that prevent the development or deterioration of mental health conditions.

Thriving communities engender a sense of belonging that develops from social connections between people. The significant measures implemented to minimise the spread of the virus created unprecedented environmental conditions, which altered the social dynamics of individuals and communities, and highlighted the importance of the role that social connectedness plays in wellbeing.



**61% of Australians have taken actions to help manage their mental health**

With nations around the globe implementing lockdowns and social distancing measures, the past two years have created a unique opportunity to understand the role that social connection plays in contributing to mental wellbeing.

This paper looks at the insights gained from this unintended “social experiment” and how social connection can be harnessed to promote and protect mental and physical wellbeing. It also examines the role that programs and organisations play to improve social connection and broader mental wellbeing.

**“The hunger to connect and belong is at the heart of our human nature. The last two years of repeated lockdowns, stress and isolation have impacted our mental health and increasingly more people are experiencing burnout. When we lose our social connectedness, we are at risk of losing our mental flexibility and natural kindness; we become vulnerable to negativity and fear. We live in times that require more humanity, compassion and generosity. So let’s focus on the small steps we can take with our family and strangers alike to build a deeper sense of belonging as a nation.”**

**Dr. Jaime Lee**  
AIA Vitality Ambassador

# Drivers of mental wellbeing

In 2021, AIA Australia released its 5590+ report,<sup>4</sup> which highlighted that there are five key modifiable behaviours which have an impact on mental health conditions and disorders, while also leading to other non-communicable diseases\* – these key factors are nutrition, physical activity, smoking, excess alcohol and our interaction with the environment.

AIA Australia is now looking at the impact that social connection and, conversely, loneliness have on mental health and wellbeing, using indicators from 2020-21, compared with 2019 and earlier.

## 5 MODIFIABLE BEHAVIOURAL FACTORS



SMOKING



UNHEALTHY DIET



PHYSICAL INACTIVITY



EXCESSIVE ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION



INTERACTION WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

LEAD TO

## 5 NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES



RESPIRATORY DISEASE



HEART DISEASE



DIABETES



CANCER



MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS AND DISORDERS

THAT CAUSE

OVER  
**90%** OF DEATHS IN AUSTRALIA



\* Cancer, heart disease, respiratory disease and diabetes.



# The science of social connection

**Social connection is the subjective experience of feeling close and a sense of belongingness with others. Scientific evidence shows that social relationships affect a range of health outcomes, including mental health, physical health, health habits, and mortality risk.<sup>5</sup> The magnitude of this effect is comparable to that of smoking and exceeds those of many other known risk factors of mortality, such as obesity or physical inactivity.<sup>6,7,8</sup>**

According to VicHealth, “social connections comprise the people we know, the friends we confide in, the family we belong to and the community we live in. These connections provide a level of social support that is critical for mental health and wellbeing.”<sup>9</sup>

During the Victorian Royal Commission into Mental Health Services,<sup>10</sup> many people, in both personal and professional capacities, told the Commission of the critical link between communities, social connection and mental health and wellbeing.

A 2015 review of the link between social relationships and depression found that people have lower levels of depression than others in the population if they have personal relationships that they can call on to provide support or offer practical or material assistance.<sup>11</sup> The quality of social relationships appears to be more important than the quantity, although some evidence suggests that a large and diverse social network can protect against depression.<sup>12</sup>

The annual Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey revealed that frequency of social contact with friends or family is a key factor in mitigating psychological distress.<sup>13</sup> Women who see friends or family at least once a week are ten per cent less likely to be in psychological distress than those who see friends and family only every three months, or less frequently. Men who see friends or family regularly are eight per cent less likely to be psychologically distressed.

Dr Emma Seppälä, Science Director at Stanford University's Centre for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, has written at length about the science of social connection.

**Women who see friends or family at least once a week are ten per cent less likely to be in psychological distress than those who see friends and family only every three months, or less frequently. Men who see friends or family regularly are eight per cent less likely to be psychologically distressed.**

She summarised the benefits of high social connection as follows:

- Lower levels of anxiety and depression
- Higher self-esteem
- Greater empathy for others
- More trusting and cooperative
- Improved physical health
- Improved mental and emotional wellbeing.

Loneliness is defined as a subjective state of negative feelings about having a lower level of social contact than desired<sup>14</sup> and research has shown that people who are lonely have poorer physical and mental health outcomes than people who feel connected to others.<sup>15</sup> People experiencing loneliness are 15 per cent more likely to be depressed, while being depressed increases the likelihood of being lonely by 10 per cent. Lonely people are 13 per cent more likely to be anxious about social interactions than those who are not lonely, while being anxious increases the likelihood of being lonely by nine per cent.<sup>15</sup>



# The impacts of the pandemic on social connection and mental wellbeing

From March 2020, measures to reduce the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly limited Australians' access to places and people outside their homes. Education and childcare facilities were closed, with students undertaking remote learning. Physical distancing and public gathering restrictions were enforced, and many workplaces ceased operations, or were required to operate remotely.

These strategies designed to manage the pandemic served to highlight the harms associated with social isolation and loneliness and underscored the value of communities.

## Work impacts

Lockdowns made remote working mandatory for many Australians. While the ability to work from home provided some people with flexibility and convenience, others found the lines between work and home blurred, making it more difficult to disengage, which has led to increased experiences of burnout and stress.<sup>16</sup> One study found that unpaid overtime hours increased across all employment types (except self-employment) from 2019 to 2020. Some 70 per cent of respondents who worked from home during the 2020 lockdowns did so at least partially outside normal working hours.<sup>17</sup>

The shift to working from home may also have removed some of the resources and managerial and collegial social support available to employees at work.<sup>18</sup>

Working parents have had the additional challenge of managing home-schooling for their children, which overseas research has shown increased stress and poor wellbeing in parents and caregivers.<sup>19</sup> This has particularly impacted women, with mothers spending an extra hour on unpaid housework and four extra hours on childcare each day.<sup>20</sup>

Sadly, many Australians lost their jobs during the pandemic, which further compounded feelings of disconnection and stress. A comparison of those who continued to work and those who lost employment during COVID-19 found that those who retained work had higher wellbeing and quality of life and less loneliness than those who lost their jobs.<sup>18</sup>

## Children and young people

Children have also been significantly impacted. Schools can nurture social and emotional development, and major disruptions to in-person learning, increased screen time and reduced physical activity can have long-term implications. Additionally, impacts on parents have in turn impacted the physical and emotional wellbeing of children.

Between March and July 2020, almost 28,000 people sought help for study stress from online mental health resource ReachOut, a 250 per cent increase year on year.<sup>21</sup> ReachOut has also seen a spike in demand from parents looking for support to help their teenagers manage study stress, up 430 per cent year on year.

## Loneliness

The restrictions put in place to control the spread of the virus had an obvious side effect of increasing levels of loneliness in the community.<sup>22</sup>

The most commonly reported personal stressor in the April 2020 ABS Household Impact of COVID-19 survey was loneliness—reported by 22 per cent of people, with females experiencing higher rates than males.<sup>23</sup>

VicHealth surveyed 2,000 Victorians to examine how the restrictions were affecting health and wellbeing during the initial round of restrictions in 2020. It was found that 30 per cent of respondents said it was hard or very hard to stay connected to friends and family during this period, and almost one in four did not feel connected with others.<sup>24</sup>

In the ABS National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing 2020-21, 15 per cent of Australians aged 16–85 years reported feeling lonely in the previous four weeks.<sup>3</sup>



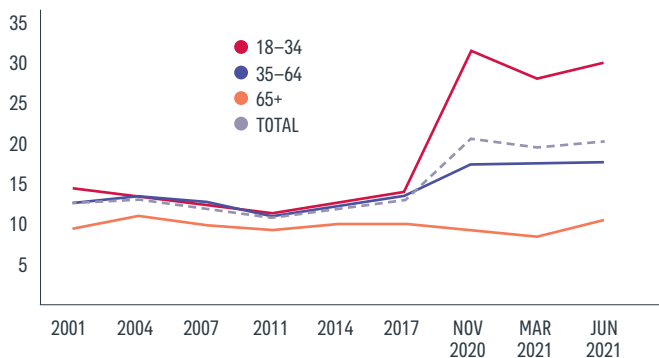
## Psychological distress

The lack of social connection and the increase in feelings of loneliness is likely to be in part responsible for the increased levels of psychological distress experienced by Australians in 2020.

As seen in Figure 1 below, data from the ABS Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey shows that the proportion of individuals in all working-age categories who experienced high or very high psychological distress in 2020–2021 was markedly higher than in 2017. This increase in mental health symptoms was most dramatic for young adults, aged 18 to 34 years.

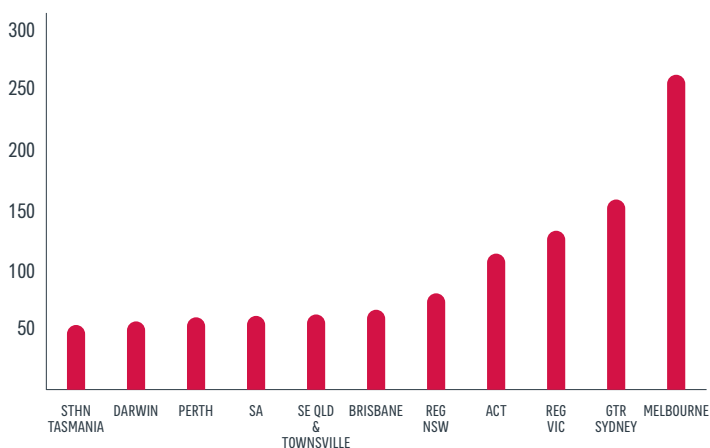
**FIGURE 1: PROPORTION OF AUSTRALIAN POPULATION AGE CATEGORIES WITH HIGH OR VERY HIGH PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

PROPORTION OF EACH AGE GROUP (%)



This has been reflected in AIA's own data, with respect to the AIA Vitality membership base and their responses to stress-related questions during the pandemic. When compared with the timing of lockdowns within each state, unsurprisingly, AIA Vitality member stress levels appeared to fluctuate according to location and level of physical distancing.

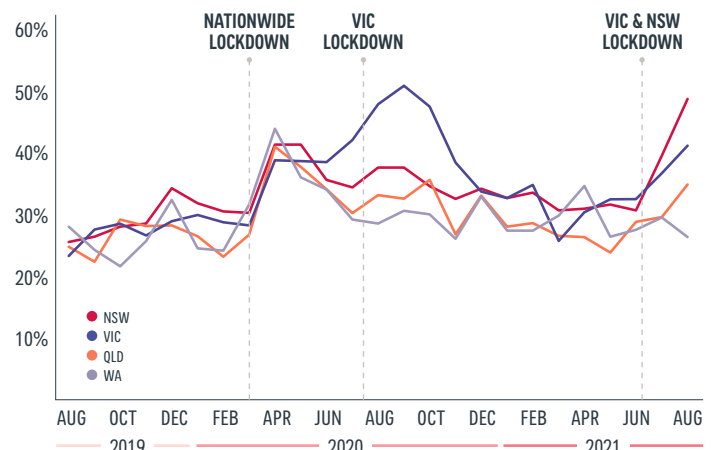
**FIGURE 2: TOTAL DAYS OF LOCKDOWN PER STATE**



**“Connection and community are fundamental pillars for our physical, mental and emotional health. It’s never been more important for individual and societal health that our connections and community are healthy, strong and consistent in our lives.”**

**Wayne Schwass**  
Founder PukaUp

**FIGURE 3: IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN ON SOCIAL CONNECTION AND STRESS**



# Management of mental health during the pandemic

In 2020-21, 17 per cent of Australians aged 16–85 years—more than three million people—saw a health professional for their mental health, of which 13 per cent saw a GP and 8 per cent saw a psychologist. An additional approximately 20 per cent (612,000 people) accessed other services for their mental health via phone or digital technologies,<sup>3</sup> including crisis support or counselling services, online treatment programs and tools to improve mental health, and mental health support groups and forums.

Medicare's telehealth psychological therapy services utilised by State show a significant increase beginning in the year ending June 2020 (Figure 4), particularly in Victoria, which experienced the longest lockdown at that time.

Data released by Lifeline Australia revealed that the helpline's 10 busiest days on record have occurred in 2020 and 2021.<sup>25</sup> Lifeline Australia Chair John Brogden noted in October 2021 that the service was regularly receiving more than 3,500 calls a day; an increase of 40 per cent in just two years.<sup>26</sup>

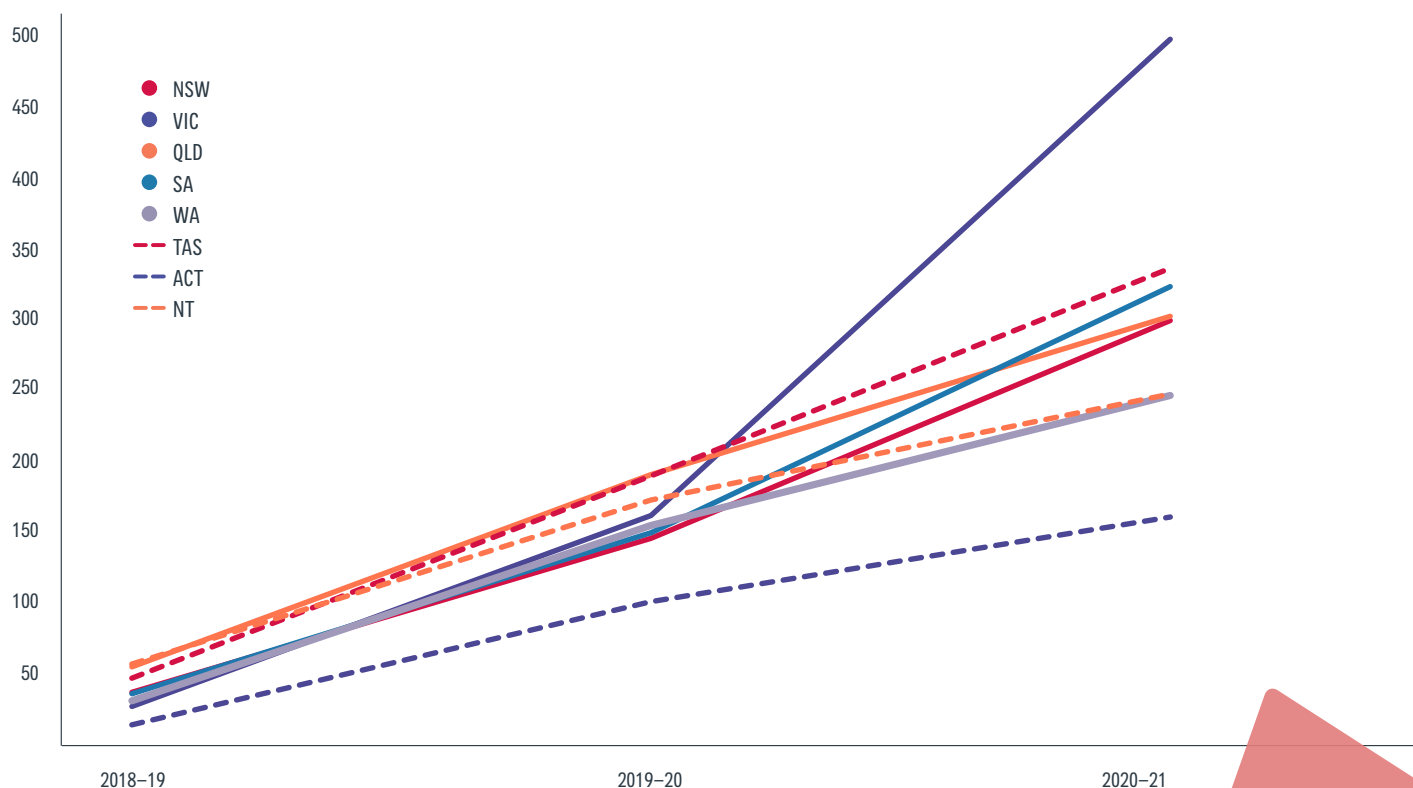
Data released by Butterfly Foundation\* and ReachOut\*\* in 2020 revealed that the pandemic – and likely lockdowns and isolation in particular – had led to a sharp spike in the number of young people seeking help online for body image and eating disorders.

There was a 48 per cent increase in contact via Butterfly's National Helpline from 2019 to 2020, and a 116 per cent increase in contact via webchat. Demand for Butterfly's helpline support stabilised in 2021, to a new normal that is 51 per cent higher than pre-COVID demand.<sup>27</sup>

Black Dog Institute also reported increased engagement in its mental health support programs, resources and social media:

- 1,895,979 to the website
- 3,770,214 website page views
- 68,240 people who accessed Black Dog Institute's online clinic, with a 97% satisfaction rate
- 71,858 registrations to mental health apps
- 1,539 patients treated in clinics

**FIGURE 4: MEDICARE TELEHEALTH PSYCHOLOGICAL THERAPY SERVICES (PER CAPITA)**



\* Butterfly Foundation is the national charity for all Australians impacted by eating disorders and body image issues, and for the families, friends and communities who support them.

\*\* ReachOut is an online mental health service for young people and their parents in Australia.



## Success stories

### Danny Frawley Centre for Health and Wellbeing – Powered by AIA Vitality

Former St Kilda Football Club great Danny Frawley was a fierce advocate for destigmatising mental ill-health and a trailblazer in starting a broader conversation about mental health.

**“Whether you were the boot studder or a player, Danny had time for you...he made you feel a sense of worth and belonging regardless of who you were.”**

**Anita Frawley**  
Wife of Danny Frawley

St Kilda Football Club is celebrating Danny’s life and immortalising his legacy as both a St Kilda champion and advocate for mental health, through the Danny Frawley Centre for Health and Wellbeing – Powered by AIA Vitality.

The centre has been designed to engage St Kilda members and fans and the local community, to assist with increasing social connection.

This will be a game-changer for both current and past athletes, as well as for the greater community, catering for both physical and mental health needs. It will incorporate a 25m lap pool, hydrotherapy pool and high-tech recovery centre, as well as a community gym, allied health services and a wellbeing centre, and will house a host of psychologists, researchers and program operators. Dedicated mental health facilities will include consulting suites for service providers, shared work areas for program development and research, a community education room for prevention and training programs as well as casual meeting spaces for facility users.

**“Through the Danny Frawley Centre, St Kilda will be a flagship club for looking after the mental health and well-being of players and the community. Research is a central component of this vision, which will allow the direct translation of cutting-edge science into the real world.”**

**Dr Elise Facer-Childs**  
Director of Research Translation Danny Frawley Centre for Health and Wellbeing – Powered by AIA Vitality

**“The centre should be about looking after the community, giving people the opportunity to be the best version of themselves.”**

**Hannah Priest**  
St Kilda FC AFLW Player

### AIA Vitality Mental Fitness Benefit

AIA Vitality is a personalised, science-backed health and wellbeing program that supports members every day to make healthier lifestyle choices. The program consists of several pillars which aim to educate members on all aspects of their wellbeing and ultimately shift the dial on health outcomes. One of these pillars is “Think Well”, which will shortly be updated to enhance its capability to be comprehensive and impactful.

The Mental Fitness Benefit will consist of an in-depth online assessment to provide members with an overall view of their mental wellbeing. Evidence-based feedback will then clearly demonstrate where opportunities might lie along with a number of tools, evidence-based content and practical support to improve their mental health.



Members will be encouraged to consistently engage in these assessments and interventions through the mechanism of AIA Vitality points which translate into rich rewards in the programme.

The partnerships, interventions and content focus on five areas that have been shown to be the most efficacious in improving mental wellbeing: physical health, sleep, mindfulness, cognitive behavioural therapy and social connection.

## Togetherall

Togetherall is a UK-based online, confidential support community, active 24 hours a day. On Togetherall, people can connect anonymously and access support from a community who care and understand.



The Vitality program in the UK has partnered with Togetherall to support its members in improving their levels of social connection in an ever-increasing virtual world and has reported that engagement with the platform has skyrocketed in recent years. This demonstrates how integral social connection is to wellbeing. During the first lockdown, thousands of people used Togetherall to support each other. For many people in the UK, it's a free, instant-access, anonymous and zero commitment way to talk, share feelings and get support from peers and mental health professionals.

The Togetherall community helped people who were isolated from friends and loved ones, to find a way to share their feelings – especially as healthcare systems struggled under the pressure and demands of COVID-19. During 2020, messages on Togetherall's platform increased by 75 per cent from the previous year. In April 2020, when lockdown hit Europe, registration to the service was up 150 per cent on the previous year.

One mental health lead in the north-west of England said at the time, that Togetherall meant that “everyone who is struggling with their mental health always has someone to talk to and a place to express how they are feeling.”

Over 40 per cent of members said that they felt less isolated as a result of using Togetherall.

## Spuds Game – Time 2 Talk

In 2021, St Kilda Football Club, alongside Movember, launched Spud's Game: Time 2 Talk, in honour of the late Danny 'Spud' Frawley, as part of a new initiative designed to tackle mental health issues within the community.

The announcement of the tribute match came in the wake of Victoria's Royal Commission into Mental Health Services which uncovered both the concerning prevalence of mental ill-health and the need for more community-focused care.

The initiative was focused on fostering mateship and connection to aid early intervention and detection of mental health issues, thereby improving outcomes for the community.

Television coverage of the game was delayed by two minutes, with viewers encouraged to use this time to check in on their loved ones.

Spud's Game not only encouraged greater connection within the community, but successfully raised over \$340,000 for mental health programs to be run out of the Danny Frawley Centre for Health and Wellbeing.

## Virtual Psychologist

Virtual Psychologist provides hour-long pre-booked text counselling services with qualified mental health professionals using a secure IT platform. Virtual Psychologist allows mental health professionals to respond more quickly and conveniently to individuals with mental health conditions than traditional mental health services.



Since November 2017, Virtual Psychologist has exchanged more than 1.8 million text messages, while supporting 3.25 million Australians with around 2000 hours of counselling.

Virtual Psychologist observed that during each lockdown in Victoria and NSW, the increase in usage rose significantly. They also saw this trend for NSW. - there was an increase in session engagement with many people having more sessions via text than in previous years, on average engaging for 8-10 sessions as opposed to six.

## Victorian Government

In 2021, as part of the 2021-22 State Budget, the Victorian Government announced it would provide funding for social prescribing trials. It was hoped that, through this, it would help to connect adults, particularly older people, with activities in their community to combat loneliness and social isolation.

Social prescribing is the process of healthcare professionals connecting people with non-clinical community groups and supports; for example, referring people to arts and creative activities, social groups, nature-based activities, physical activity, education, or volunteering as part of their recovery plan.

This follows the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, which handed down its final report in February 2021. The Commission considered that social prescribing had the potential to strengthen future pathways between mental health and wellbeing services and the community.<sup>10</sup>

# Conclusion

**While the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is still unfolding in many countries, and the effects on an already dire mental health burden are set to be severe and far reaching, taking no action cannot be an option.**

It is critical to assess and apply strategies to improve the mental wellbeing of the population and to consider these needs in addition to their physical health needs. By recognising the significant impact that social connection has on overall health outcomes, interventions can have even greater impacts on the individuals and communities they serve.

We need to shift the focus towards a preventive mindset, on initiatives at the population level that encourage early intervention at instances of ill-health and help prevent them occurring in the first place. Through a combination of innovative behaviour change interventions and technology solutions as well as a re-prioritisation of policies, a mentally healthy society is achievable.

At AIA, we're focused on helping people live Healthier, Longer, Better Lives. It is through insight-gathering projects, such as the Power of Social Connection report, that we are able to gain an in-depth understanding of the health of the nation and shine a light on these critical issues. These insights give us a platform to collaborate with our members, broader communities and stakeholders to identify the changes, both big and small, that we can make to improve the health and wellbeing of all Australians.



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