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## Media Release

### **World-leading study highlights key indicators that could predict and reduce depression risk**

*Potential to reduce the number of Australians suffering depression incidences by 300,000 per year through healthier lifestyle choices*

**Melbourne, 28 August, 2020** – In a world-first, leading life and health insurer AIA Australia has partnered with Quantum Health to release the world's largest and richest research into the link between depression, demographics, health, lifestyle and circumstance – demonstrating which factors are both within and outside an individuals' control when it comes to depression risk and highlighting potential large-scale implications for the health of our nation and the economy.

After looking at over 1,400 possible contributing factors, the AIA Australia research shines a light on the health and behavioural characteristics that are critical to identifying the risk of depression, with key insights showing that a relationship exists between lower depression rates and healthier lifestyle choices (such as diet, exercise and sleep) as well as happier circumstances (such as lower stress and illness levels).

The indicators that were found to be highly significant in predicting an individual's risk of depression include:

- **Gender** – depression rates in women are almost double that of men
- **Age** – while older individuals are more likely to be depressed, this is typically explained by non-age features such as stress and comorbidities
- **Illness** – people who have previously been diagnosed with depression are re-diagnosed at rates 20 times higher than those who have never been diagnosed - the rate of depression increases 1.5 times among those who have a very ill family member
- **Exercise** – People who do more exercise, or who do it at a higher intensity have lower risks of depression – those who take 10,000+ steps a day have half the depression rate of those who take 2,000 or less
- **Sleep patterns** – people who sleep less than four hours a night have a 32 percent higher depression rate than those who sleep seven to eight hours
- **Diet** – People who consume three or more sugary drinks per day increase their risk of depression by 11 percent
- **Smoking and alcohol** – current and ex-smokers have a 23 percent higher risk of depression than non-smokers and excessive drinking<sup>1</sup> increases depression risk by 14 percent<sup>2</sup>

The impact of the study for Australians and Australian employers is significant with the research suggesting that if Australians make healthier lifestyle choices by practicing at least average health habits the national depression incidence rate could reduce from six percent to 4.7 percent – resulting in 300,000 fewer depression incidences per year, 4.7 million recovered working days and saving the Australian economy around \$3 billion per year.

CEO and Managing Director of AIA Australia and New Zealand, Damien Mu, said that with depression, anxiety and substance use disorders being the most common mental health conditions in Australia and at a time when mental health is at the forefront of the collective national agenda, this research is integral in both understanding and fostering better outcomes for those impacted by mental wellbeing issues.

“There is no question that 2020 so far has created untold pressure on Australians' stress levels and mental health – due in large part to isolation, health issues, job insecurity and economic uncertainty – and we currently find ourselves in a global fight for healthier, longer, better lives,” said Mu.

“What this study demonstrates is that there are factors within an individual's control that can reduce and prevent their risk of depression – through making small lifestyle changes like getting more sleep and

<sup>1</sup> Defined as the person experiencing guilt about their drinking behaviour.

<sup>2</sup> For people who have a history of depression.

increasing how much exercise you get each week you can make a big difference to your overall mental wellbeing,” he added.

“As a life and health insurer with a dream of championing Australia to be one of the healthiest and best protected nations in the world we are committed to better understanding the factors that impact mental health and providing better outcomes for our customers and the broader community – we hope this research can be used by people at risk of depression and by the wider industry to improve mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention,” he added.

Former AFL legend, leading mental health advocate and founder of social enterprise PukaUp, Wayne Schwass understands the challenges that many Australians face when it comes to depression and mental wellbeing having battled with mental health conditions for the majority of his AFL career.

“Wellbeing applies to 100 percent of the Australian population which is why I believe we don’t have to wait until we become unwell before we start to prioritise our wellbeing,” said Schwass.

“You can begin your individual wellbeing journey today by making decisions that have a positive effect on your wellbeing such as quality sleep, regular exercise, a balanced diet, social connection, authentic communication,” he added.

“We can be in control of our mental health, it no longer has to control us, that’s empowering. When we take responsibility for our own health we give ourselves the opportunity to make decisions and choices that help keep us healthy and well emotionally.”

Health and performance expert and AIA Vitality ambassador Dr Jaime Lee echoes this sentiment by Schwass and her advice to Australians who are looking to feel a sense of control, in what has been an extremely challenging year, is to start by taking a pause and asking themselves what is the one small change they can make to their lifestyle to improve their mental resilience.

“The biggest finding from the AIA Australia and Quantum research is that 30 percent of depression risk is influenced by controllable factors – physical exercise, a good night’s sleep, having a well-balanced diet and not smoking – which is really encouraging,” said Dr. Lee.

“With 45 percent of Australian adults experiencing a mental health issue at some point in their lifetime, cultivating mental wellbeing and reducing your risk of depression can start with small lifestyle changes which will have a big impact on your overall wellbeing as a whole,” she added.

**-ENDS-**

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### **About the research**

*A summary of the key findings and insights from the world-leading research on predictive depression factors by AIA Australia in partnership with Quantum Health is available upon request.*

The initial dataset of the AIA Australia and Quantum Health research covers a global population of over five million lives, including healthcare claims incurred over 10 years and equating to 1.5 billion lines of claims and activity data.

The study combined a literature review of the connection between depression and behaviour, as well as analyses of health claim data and biometric-tracked physical activity data – including steps, heart rate and exercise type – sourced from health insurer Discovery Health and the wellbeing program Vitality in South Africa.

Despite the differences between South Africa and Australia (e.g. in demographics, culture and socioeconomic), this data provides a reasonable proxy and starting point for Australia in terms of depression prevalence.

### **About AIA Australia**

AIA Australia is a leading life insurance specialist with over 47 years' experience. With a unique customer value proposition focused on life, health and wellbeing, our purpose is to make a difference in people's lives.

In November 2019, AIA Australia commenced a Joint Cooperation Agreement (JCA) with the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA) for the joint operation of their Australian life insurance businesses, AIA Australia and CommInsure Life. The JCA enables AIA Australia to exercise a level of direct management control and oversight over CommInsure Life.

Together, AIA Australia and CommInsure Life offer a range of products that protect and enhance the lives of more than 3.8 million Australians. Our vision is to embrace shared value in championing Australia and New Zealand to be the healthiest and best protected nations in the world. With AIA Vitality – the world's leading science-based health and wellbeing program – we help members to live healthier, longer, better lives.

AIA Australia has been recognised with multiple awards, including the Women in Finance Employer of the Year Award (2018, 2019), Super Review's Best Insurer of the Year (2018, 2019), and iSelect Partner Awards Insurer of the Year (2019).

Further information at [www.aia.com.au](http://www.aia.com.au).

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