



AIA Australia Limited
(ABN 79 004 837 861 AFSL 230043)
PO Box 6111
Melbourne VIC 3004
Phone : 1800 333 613
Fax : 1800 832 266
AIA.COM.AU

Media Release

New AIA report shines a light on the power of social connection

Report to coincide with the launch of Danny Frawley Centre for Health and Wellbeing - powered by AIA Vitality

Melbourne, 1 March 2022 – A new report released by leading life, health and wellbeing insurer AIA Australia has revealed the effects that extended lockdowns and associated reduced social connection have had on Australians' mental health.

In the report, AIA Australia aims to understand the role of 'social connection' - the experience of feeling close and a sense of belongingness with others – as a driver of mental wellbeing. Titled *The Power of Social Connection*, the paper addresses the systemic impacts on mental health caused by the unprecedented living and working conditions experienced by Australians over the past 24 months.

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

Inevitably, COVID-19 radically altered the daily life and working conditions of Australians by increasing job insecurity, financial strain, and isolation, amplifying the already significant demand for mental health services, products, and solutions.² Since the start of the pandemic, 61 per cent of Australians have taken actions to manage their mental health with around 612,000 accessing support via phone or digital technologies.³

According to the insurer, social relationships can affect a wide range of health outcomes, including mental health, physical health, general health habits, and mortality risks. Studies have startlingly suggested that a lack of social connection can cause more damage to health than obesity, smoking and high blood pressure.⁴

AIA Australia CEO and Managing Director, Damien Mu, said thriving communities generate a natural sense of belonging between people, and that the unprecedented restrictions enforced during the pandemic had fundamentally impacted social connection opportunities during this period.

"The daily lives of Australians have changed significantly over the last two years. Extended periods of lockdown, remote working and education have increased feelings of loneliness, stress and anxiety," said Mr Mu.

"The purpose of AIA Australia's new *The Power of Social Connection* report is to progress the conversation around the mental health challenges facing Australians. We hope that increased dialogue about these issues and increased awareness of the importance of preventative measures, will lead to improved health outcomes that enable people to live healthier, longer, better lives."

Regular connection to friendship and family networks is shown in the report to be key to alleviating psychological distress. The report also highlights that women who see friends and family at least once a week are ten per cent less likely to be in psychological distress than those who see them only every three months,

¹ Santomauro, D. F et al (2021). Global prevalence and burden of depressive and anxiety disorders in 204 countries and territories in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Lancet*, 398(10312), 1700–1712. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)02143-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)02143-7)

² https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportrep/024705/toc_pdf/MentalHealthandSuicidePrevention-FinalReport.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf

³ <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/first-insights-national-study-mental-health-and-wellbeing-2020-21>

⁴ Yang, Y. C., Boen, C., Gerken, K., Li, T., Schorpp, K., & Harris, K. M. (2016). Social relationships and physiological determinants of longevity across the human life span. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113(3), 578–583 <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1511085112>; Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, J. B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. *PLoS medicine*, 7(7), e1000316; House, J. S., Landis, K. R., & Umberson, D. (1988). Social relationships and health. *Science*, 241(4865), 540-545.

or less frequently. Similar results were uncovered in men, who are eight per cent less likely to experience psychological distress when maintaining regular social connections with others.⁵

AIA Australia has utilised these latest findings to inform and underpin its new initiative with the St Kilda Football Club, funding and co-launching the new Danny Frawley Centre for Health and Wellbeing – Powered by AIA Vitality, as part of its commitment to the improvement of the community’s mental health.

When asked about the launch of the new centre, St Kilda Football Club’s CEO, Matt Finnis, said “All of the facilities and programs at the Danny Frawley Centre are provided to our players, coaches and staff (past and present) but also to our community – and that is what Spud as the great connector of people from all walks of life would have demanded of us.

“We hope the Danny Frawley Centre can help progress the conversation and focus towards mental health as a means of promoting a thriving community.

“AIA Australia has also been crucial in getting us to this point and we look forward to continuing our partnership as the Danny Frawley Centre grows.”

Mr Mu added, “The Danny Frawley Centre for Health and Wellbeing is a beacon of hope for the St Kilda community and will be a place where people can create a sense of belonging and see their physical and mental wellbeing flourish. AIA Australia is proud to be involved in the centre and looks forward to hearing the positive stories that will come from it.”

AIA Australia is a passionate advocate for prevention and early intervention measures that support the health of Australians. In its 5590+ report published in 2021, AIA highlighted the increasing evidence of the impact of mental health conditions on Australia’s health statistics, with depression being the leading cause of disability worldwide.

The key messages from *The Power of Social Connection* and 5590+ research align with those of the insurer’s science-backed health and wellbeing program AIA Vitality, which incentivises people to focus on four core elements of their wellbeing; physical activity (Move Well), nutrition (Eat Well), mental wellbeing (Think Well) and preventive measures (Plan Well).

AIA Australia’s *The Power of Social Connection* report can be viewed at:
<https://www.aia.com.au/en/individual/about-aia/media-centre.html>

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Contact: Ted Mitchell
Bastion Amplify
tedm@bastionagency.com
0400 104 738

Additional Key Insights from The Power of Social Connection report

Additional key insights from *The Power of Social Connection* on the impacts of a lack of social connection and isolation amongst Australians over the last 24 months include:

⁵ University of Melbourne Distress Signals <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/distress-signals>

Work impacts

- 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.⁶ One study found that unpaid overtime hours increased across all employment types (except self-employment) from 2019 to 2020. Some 70% of respondents who worked from home during the 2020 lockdowns did so at least partially outside normal working hours.⁷
- Working parents have had the additional challenge of managing home-schooling for their children - this has particularly impacted women, with mothers spending an extra hour on unpaid housework and four extra hours on childcare each day.⁸
- 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.⁹

Children and young people

- Children have also been significantly impacted - 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.¹⁰ 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 most commonly reported personal stressor in the April 2020 ABS Household Impact of COVID-19 survey was loneliness—reported by 22% of people, with females experiencing higher rates than males.¹¹
- 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% 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.¹²
- 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.¹³

Psychological distress

- 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.

⁶ Johnson, A., Dey, S., Nguyen, H., Groth, M., Joyce, S., Tan, L., Glozier, N., & Harvey, S. B. (2020). A review and agenda for examining how technology-driven changes at work will impact workplace mental health and employee well-being. *Australian Journal of Management*, 45(3), 402–424. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0312896220922292>

⁷ Nahum, D. (2020). Work and life in a pandemic: An update on hours of work and unpaid overtime under Covid-19. https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/theausinstitute/pages/3395/attachments/original/1605571432/GHODT_2020_formatted_FINAL_FOR_RELEASE.pdf?1605571432

⁸ Ruffolo, M., Price, D., Schoultz, M., Leung, J., Bonsaksen, T., Thygesen, H., & Geirdal, A. Ø. (2021). Employment Uncertainty and Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic Initial Social Distancing Implementation: a Cross-national Study. *Global Social Welfare*, 8(2), 141–150. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40609-020-00201-4>

⁹ Black Dog Institute Modern work: how changes to the way we work are impacting Australians' mental health (Oct 2021) https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/modern_work.pdf

¹⁰ ReachOut Help is available as study stress skyrockets due to COVID-19 (2 Aug 2021) <https://about.au.reachout.com/blog/help-is-available-as-study-stress-skyrockets-due-to-covid-19>

¹¹ ABS 2020. Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, 29 Apr–4 May 2020. ABS cat. No. 4940.0. Canberra: ABS.

¹² Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, VicHealth Coronavirus Victorian Wellbeing Impact Study, Report for Survey #1, 2020, p. 24

¹³ First insights from the National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing, 2020-21 available at <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/first-insights-national-study-mental-health-and-wellbeing-2020-21>

About AIA Australia

AIA Australia is a leading life insurance specialist with 50 years' experience and a commitment to help Australians live healthier, longer, better lives. In 2014 the company launched AIA Vitality, a world leading, science-based health and wellbeing program, to the Australian market. In July 2017, AIA and its partners launched AIA's health insurance business, now known as AIA Health Insurance.

In 2021, CommInsure Life was integrated into AIA Australia. The lives of more than 3.8 million Australians are protected and enhanced through AIA Australia's unique value proposition of life, health and wellbeing. Our vision is to embrace shared value in championing Australia and New Zealand to be the healthiest and best protected nations in the world.

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), FSC Life Insurance Industry Awards Innovation in Group Life Insurance (2021), Shared Value Awards Corporate Organisation Leading Through Shared Value (2019), Shared Value Awards Organisation of the Year (2020) and Shared Value Project of the Year (2021).

Further information at www.aia.com.au.

AIA Vitality

AIA Australia is passionate about helping people live healthier, longer, better lives, and central to this, is its digital health and wellbeing program, AIA Vitality. AIA Vitality is founded on the concept of behavioural economics. Members are empowered and rewarded for making small lifestyle changes with the aim of decreasing their risk of chronic disease and improving their physical and mental wellbeing. In 2021, AIA Vitality members completed nearly 300,000 health and wellbeing assessments, visited the gym nearly 500,000 times and received over \$3 million in Active Benefits Rewards for keeping active.

Further information at <https://www.aia.com.au/en/individual/aia-vitality.html>

AIA Australia's 5590+ report

In the second half of last year, AIA Australia released its 5590+ report which highlights how **five** individually modifiable behavioural factors – physical inactivity, poor nutrition, smoking, excess alcohol, and our interaction with the environment – lead to **five** major non-communicable diseases (NCDs) – cancer, diabetes, respiratory disease, cardiovascular diseases, and mental health conditions and disorders – which are responsible for **over 90 per cent of deaths** in Australia. As part of its work to address the prevalence of these mostly preventable diseases, AIA Australia wants to empower Aussies to introduce some small somethings to help reduce their risk of chronic illness.

Further information at <https://www.aia.com.au/content/dam/au/en/docs/reports/5590-report.pdf>

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