It Takes a Village: How social connections improve our quality of life

Research from Australia and around the world shows that social connections are an essential remedy to loneliness, anxiety, and depression.

There is a growing body of research showing that people with strong social connections are happier and healthier. And yet, studies also show that one third of Australians do not see or hear from their neighbours regularly, nearly half have no neighbours they can call on for help, and that one third of people no longer trust their neighbours.

The following summary highlights Australian research showing that loneliness is a major health issue before introducing an innovative new program seeking to curb this trend and improve our wellbeing through enabling a variety of ways to make meaningful social connections.

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Australian Loneliness Report - 2018

In 2018, the Australian Psychological Society and Swinburne University produced the Australian Loneliness Report based on a national survey of adults.

The report examined the prevalence of loneliness and how it affects the physical and mental health of Australians.

One in four Australian adults are lonely

Nearly **55%** of the population feel they lack companionship at least sometimes

One in two (**50.5%**) Australians feel lonely for at least one day in a week, while one in four (**27.6%**) feel lonely for three or more days

Lonely Australians are **15.2%** more likely to be depressed and **13.1%** more likely to be anxious about social interactions than those not lonely

Higher levels of loneliness are associated with higher levels of social interaction anxiety, less social interaction, poorer psychological wellbeing and poorer quality of life.

Loneliness significantly affects our health and wellbeing too. To further reinforce the impact of this report came the first national white paper on loneliness 'Ending Loneliness Together in Australia'.

This paper and subsequent campaign represents a groundswell of activity to address the impacts of loneliness, with further studies showing that:

Loneliness can affect life expectancy by up to **32%**

14.4% (2.3 million) of Australians aged 16-85 experience anxiety in any one year and around one million adults and 100,000 young people experience depression.

The effects of loneliness are like smoking 15 cigarettes a day and pose a greater health risk than obesity.

Increasing social connections is the solution
So, what does all this mean? Dr Michelle Lim, author of the Australian Loneliness Report and Scientific Chair of the Ending Loneliness Together - White Paper explains that just like when you are hungry, you're motivated to eat; when you're lonely, you're motivated to connect.

Much of the available evidence points us to the idea that social connections improve the quality of our lives. It might strike us as an insignificant point; however, nothing could be further from the truth. It's what has prompted many GPs to begin 'social prescribing'. Just like a GP might give a script to some medicine to alleviate an existing health issue, GPs can give a script for social actions and behaviours that work to address the issue.

It should come as no surprise then, that the primary finding from the longest longitudinal study ever conducted is this: good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Where community connections are strong, people are protected from depression and even hospital admissions. Social connections promote our wellbeing across the life span, particularly in later life.

> "*Depression and anxiety can lead to suicide. Friendship, connectedness, engagement, community – these are the great lifesavers.*"
>
> **Hugh Mackay,** Author and Social Researcher

Participating in social and civic life enhances our levels of social cohesion and higher levels of cohesion are strongly related to lower levels of psychological distress. Participating in neighbourhood and community groups can help reduce the incidence of loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Australian research has found:

- Neighbourhood measures of social support and interaction are positively and significantly correlated with individual life satisfaction

- Residents that have strong connections with, and trust in neighbours are more likely to perceive their neighbourhood as safer compared to their counterparts

- Having social connections acts as a buffer against stressful events and can reduce stress levels and protect mental health

- Using strength-based approaches to build positive social connections, including through volunteering and interest-based activities is more likely to increase a sense of meaning and purpose in people's interactions

Council's role in increasing social connections

The Ending Loneliness Together - White Paper describes the central roles of local government in efforts to reduce loneliness including:

- Designing and building safe environments for people to come together to interact

- Increasing valuable social opportunities and purposeful activities so that people can be encouraged to engage in meaningful social interactions.

"_Local Governments and other key stakeholders can increase valuable social opportunities and purposeful activities so that people can be encouraged to engage._**"**

Similarly, the recently published 'Loneliness Thought Leadership Roundtable Report' lists a key action for the community services sector to utilise existing infrastructure and systems, e.g. Neighbourhood Houses, cultural networks to support local communities and 'villages'.

It Takes a Village (ITAV)

It Takes a Village is a new community development program that inspires and equips the local community with the following three key actions they can take to increase social connections and feelings of belonging in the many neighbourhoods of the Northern Beaches:

1. Know your neighbour
2. Get active in a group or activity
3. Give something back

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