

## Relationships Australia Canberra & Region - COVID-19 Impact Report

### Summary

An internet survey of 419 individuals conducted by Relationships Australia Canberra and Region during the COVID-19 pandemic found that around half of all respondents experienced an increase in feelings of anxiety, low mood, and loneliness. Around one-third of respondents reported overall poorer physical and mental health, and one-third reported increased financial pressures; just under one-third reported increased use of drugs and alcohol. The levels of conflict at home remained stable for nearly half of all respondents; however, one-fifth reported increased conflict within their family. More than half of all respondents reported less engagement and connection to their community.

The majority of respondents reported they stayed connected with their family and friends using phone calls, video calling, texting, and smartphone applications. The survey found engaging in shared activities with family members, such as cooking, gardening, and walking, were working well during self-isolation. Respondents reported being happy with the enhanced connection, communication, and support from family members during the pandemic. Some respondents indicated they were enjoying the slower pace of life during the restrictions; however, many missed the physical contact with others and were looking forward to seeing family and friends in person.

### Rationale & Method

The aim of the survey was to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives and relationships of people accessing the Relationships Australia Canberra and Region (RACR) website.

As a result of the COVID19 pandemic, the Australian government implemented restrictions in April-May 2020 that limited the Australian public from leaving their houses, except for essential purposes, visiting friends or family, or travelling outside of their region. Restrictions also included the closure of public spaces such as schools, restaurants, cafes, pubs, gyms, retail outlets, sporting venues, parks, and playgrounds. Economic data indicates that many people lost their jobs or were temporarily stood down, and where possible, people still employed began working remotely from home. The survey examined the impact of these restrictions on people's relationships, particularly in relation to the increased time spent at home with immediate family, and physical disconnection from extended family, friends, and the wider community.

An anonymous, mixed methods internet survey was distributed across the Relationships Australia network, and via advertisements on the RACR website, and Facebook. The survey was available online from April 21<sup>st</sup> to May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020. In this time the survey was completed by 420 people. Quantitative results were collated and thematic analysis was conducted on qualitative responses.

### **The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on feelings and behaviours**

Respondents were asked to report whether their experience of certain feelings and behaviours had increased, decreased, or stayed the same during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 1).

More than 55% (N=232) of respondents reported increased feelings of anxiety or nervousness, 6% (N=24) reported a decrease, and 32% (N=132) reported no change. In relation to feelings of depression or low mood, more than 48% (N=202) of respondents reported an increase, 7% (N=28) reported a decrease, and 34% (N=144) reported no change.

Just under half (45%, N=191) of respondents reported increased loneliness, 8% (N=33) reported a decrease, and 33% (N=138) reported no change. More than one-third of respondents reported increased poor mental health (34%, N=142), 7.0% (N=29) reported a decrease, and 41% (N=170) reported no change.

Conflict within the family increased for 22% (N=91) of respondents, decreased for 16% (N=65), and stayed the same for 44% (N=186) of respondents, while involvement with the community decreased for 61% (N=255) of respondents, and stayed the same for 18% (N=75).

In relation to poor physical health, 29% (N=119) of respondents reported an increase, 18% (N=73) reported a decrease, and 43% (N=179) reported no change. Almost one-third of respondents reported an increase in drug or alcohol consumption (28%, N=117), while drug and alcohol consumption decreased for 9% (N=38) and stayed the same for 37% (N=153) of respondents.

Just under one-third of respondents reported increased financial pressures (30%, N=126), 15% (N=60) reported decreased financial pressures and for 45% (N=185) financial pressure stayed the same during social restrictions. Gambling behaviours were not applicable for the majority of respondents (77%, N=324) and had stayed the same for 21% (N=87) of respondents.

Half of the respondents added explanatory comments to their responses, particularly in relation to increased anxiety and mental health concerns:

*“My anxieties are about the long-term impact of the pandemic economically and politically as well as worries about family overseas.”*

*“I live alone and have been working from home for 5 weeks. I’m lonely and sad but feel guilty for being upset because I still have a job and nothing is “wrong”.”*

*“Definitely feeling anxious about future finances, what will [the] outcome be after the pandemic.”*

*“As someone diagnosed with anxiety disorders, physical distancing is both a good and bad thing. The compulsion to isolate yourself completely from everyone, including family, is quite strong. Forced interactions with no alone time for long periods are exhausting - even when it is the people you love the most in the world and want to be with every day.”*

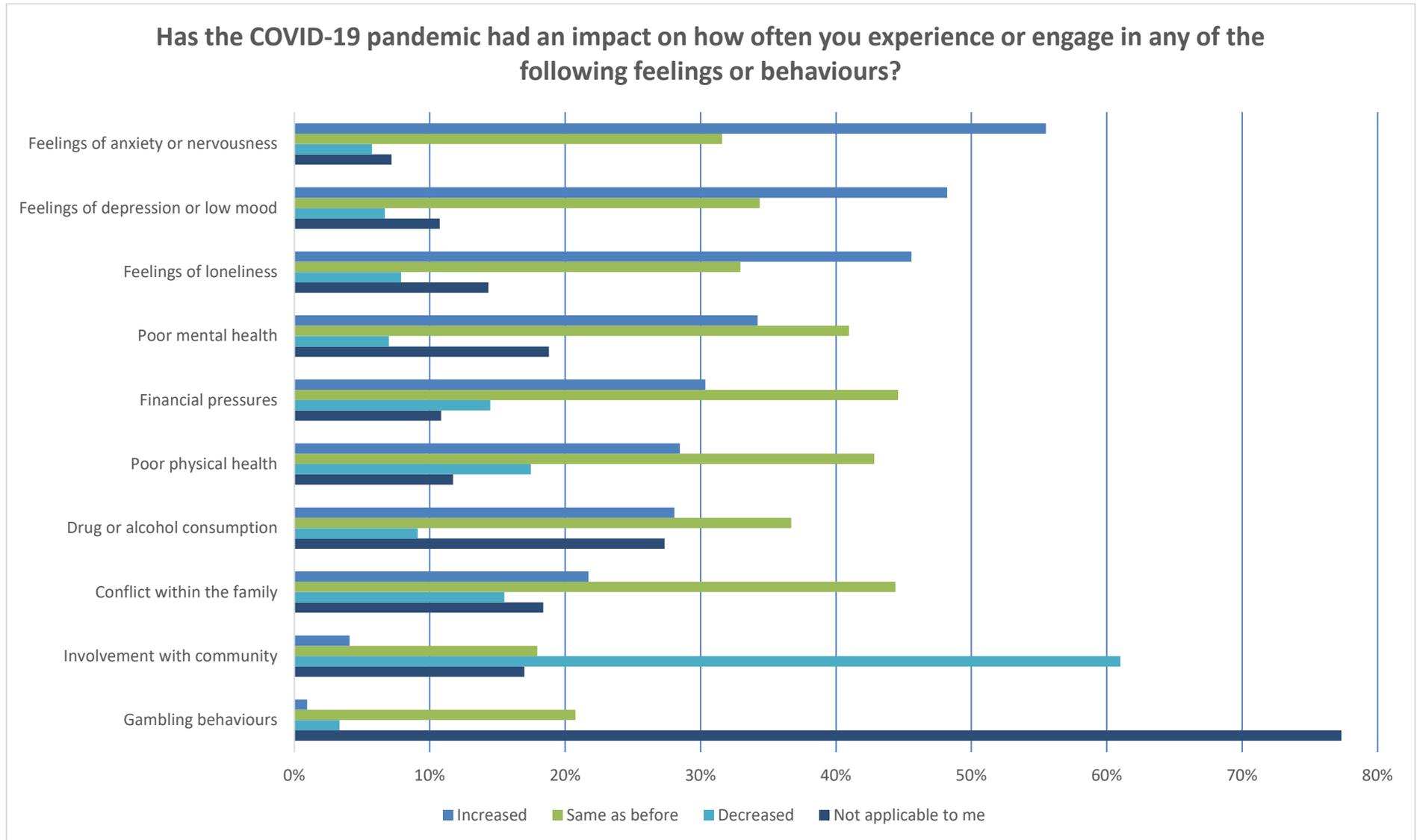
Others described mixed effects of the pandemic on their mental health:

*“My mental health has improved in some aspects - more time to do things I enjoy, more effort to reach out to friends digitally or through telephone calls. But has decreased due to lack of income, cancellations of courses and other big plans for the year which will have long term impacts. Additionally, while immediate family relationships are good, my mental health struggles because of wider family circles and their opinions and perspectives on Covid (or conspiracy theories).”*

*“I'm worried more about the world and people suffering, especially straight after the bushfires which made me quite anxious anyway, and the ever-looming threat of climate change. But at home, it's actually been ok. My two small kids are going well and we're enjoying the slower pace of life, my husband usually travels a lot for work so we've had him home which is great.”*

*“I am thriving under stay at home orders. Feeling anxious about a return to ‘normal’.”*

Figure 1.



## Maintaining connections with friends and family

Responses from 391 survey respondents were grouped into eight categories, with most respondents naming more than one form of communication (see Table 1) that they used to keep connections with friends and family.

**Table 1. Method used for communicating with family and friends, percentage**

| Communication method                               | Number of respondents (N) | Percentage of respondents (%) |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Phone calls  | 231                       | 59%                           |
| Video conferencing (Facetime, Skype, Zoom)         | 224                       | 57%                           |
| Texting or smartphone apps (What's App, Messenger) | 150                       | 38%                           |
| Social media (Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram)       | 102                       | 26%                           |
| In person social distancing                        | 68                        | 17%                           |
| Email  | 36                        | 9%                            |
| Not staying in touch                               | 27                        | 7%                            |
| Other (e.g., letters)                              | 7                         | 2%                            |

Phone calls (59%) and video chats (57%) were the most popular forms of communication used by survey respondents to stay in touch from a distance. Texting and smartphone apps, used by 38% of respondents, included chatting online or playing games with others remotely (i.e., on a phone or on a video gaming console connected to the internet).

Qualitative comments regarding the use of technology for maintaining connections were both positive and negative:

*"Thank goodness for internet! Lucky we've been able to keep 'going' to Scouts, Playgroup and work online, which has been a great connection with friends and the outside world."*

*"Email, text, phone, Zoom. I find these poor cousins of face to face connection and have never liked the phone."*

*"FaceTime has been a blessing but not nearly the same as seeing our grandchildren in person."*

*"We've shifted our regular games with friends to Zoom meetings. Our children are finding it harder as they need the physical play with their friends."*

*"I'm doing well with my friends, we already had a pretty strong history of online communication."*

*"Text messages/messenger. But this is no substitute for seeing them in real life and does 't make me feel as connected to them."*

*“At my age most of my friends are not sufficiently computer literate to use Facebook or Zoom. Mostly only keeping up with (much) younger people!”*

Those who reported meeting with friends or family in person (17%) noted the use of social distancing measures:

*“1:1 catch ups for exercise or to share a socially distant meal.”*

*“Occasional visit with the kids inside the car and myself outside.”*

*“Phone and the occasional appropriately distanced coffee.”*

*“In person (occasionally, briefly, and from a distance), messaging online and online video chats.”*

A minority of respondents (7%) reported not staying in touch with friends or family:

*“Not very well. It is easy to withdraw into the routine of being at home.”*

*“I’m withdrawing. Communicating through media is draining.”*

### **Strategies that work well while spending more time with family and friends**

Responses from 334 survey recipients were grouped into seven categories of activities (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Activities that worked well while staying at home during the pandemic, percentage**

| Activities  | Number of respondents (N) | Percentage of respondents (%) |
|---|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Activities together (cooking, gardening, puzzles)     | 116                       | 35%                           |
| I live alone/Not applicable                           | 73                        | 22%                           |
| Exercise or physical activity                         | 61                        | 18%                           |
| Giving each other space                               | 59                        | 18%                           |
| Relational (talking, showing understanding, kindness) | 52                        | 16%                           |
| Maintaining a routine                                 | 19                        | 6%                            |
| Nothing is working well/Not doing anything            | 13                        | 4%                            |

Thirty-five per cent of respondents enjoyed engaging in activities with their partners or family members, from cooking to watching movies, however, more than one-fifth of survey respondents reported that they live alone.:

*"Meals together, which was hard before because we were all so busy."*

*"We also play board games or video games, which helps keep things fun and increases social connection."*

*"We're doing more gardening, planning renovation projects, decluttering the house, and reading books and cooking with the kids."*

*"Playing cards and longer conversations after the meals. Learning new things."*

*"Baking with my daughter, cooking the evening meal with my husband, doing things I enjoy but have had little time to do."*

*"Cooking, gardening and craft activities bring us closer together."*

Eighteen per cent of respondents reported exercising with their family members, mostly in the form of daily walks or playing outdoors with the children. Another 18% of respondents reported that giving each other space and retaining independent activities was working well for their family:

*"We have spent quite a lot of time doing our own thing but in the same space which is working well."*

*"I have had to make myself a 'safe' zone really. Shut myself away and don't even try to interact with anybody and just plug in my headphones to try and achieve personal space. I am then ready to be sociable again."*

*"Each having our own space for certain times of the day to have breaks from each other."*

*"Hiding in different parts of the house so we all have our own space. Most of us are introverts and need our alone time."*

Sixteen per cent of respondents reported using relational techniques to maintain peace and a happy atmosphere at home while in quarantine:

*"Being kind to each other. Acknowledging the underlying stress we are all living under."*

*"Being gentle with each other."*

*"Communication! Having conversations about how we are feeling and how we are coping and remembering not to blame anyone."*

*"We're trying to talk and be as open as possible with how we're feeling."*



*"I'm loving the slow pace of it all and would love that to continue."*

*"A slower lifestyle. It is such a relief to have so much down time. I'm not missing the busyness at all."*

*"Having more down time and space to just be and not have every available moment booked up."*

*"Keep my diary less active. I now realize that I had too many commitments and didn't have enough time for reflection and grounded time."*

*"Stay home more. I don't want the isolating to end yet."*

Seventeen per cent of respondents wanted to maintain the increased exercise they had been engaging in during the pandemic. An additional seventeen per cent wanted to continue engaging in more recreational activities mentioned previously. Home cooked meals were mentioned by several respondents as something they hoped to continue.

Fifteen per cent of respondents wanted to retain the increase in connectedness and compassion they felt had resulted from the pandemic, both within their families and across the wider community:

*"The level of connection and intimacy grown during this time is wonderful. I hope to keep it."*

*"The compassion people have for people doing it tough instead of stigma; people are now relating concern which is a lovely blessing."*

*"I enjoy the community unity like ANZAC service in our driveways. Great way to get to know your neighbour."*

*"Being a bit easier on myself and living in a world where there is less rage, everyone is a bit easier on each other and there is more understanding of people's challenges."*

*"Spending more quality time together as a family."*

*"Continue to meet and greet people walking past my house."*

Fourteen per cent of respondents hoped to continue working from home after the pandemic, at least part-time. Reduced commute time and increased flexibility in hours were the most common reasons cited for this. Eight per cent of respondents wanted to maintain the use of technology for some of their daily interactions, particularly for online classes and workouts, medical appointments, and communicating with family and friends interstate. Two per cent wanted to continue using social distancing measures to reduce the spread of germs in the community.

## Activities people are looking forward to when life gets back to normal

The responses of 387 survey participants were grouped into seven categories (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Activities being looked forward to post-pandemic, percentage**

|   | Number of respondents (N) | Per centage of respondents (%) |
|---|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Seeing family and friends                         | 203                       | 52%                            |
| Reopening of activities and services              | 156                       | 40%                            |
| The pandemic being over (more freedom, less fear) | 61                        | 16%                            |
| Physical contact                                  | 43                        | 11%                            |
| Travel  | 37                        | 10%                            |
| Time and space alone                              | 16                        | 4%                             |
| Nothing/Don't want to go back to normal           | 8                         | 2%                             |

Fifty-two per cent of respondents reported they were most looking forward to seeing their family and friends in person after the pandemic is over, with 40% looking forward to the reopening of activities and services, predominantly sporting venues/gyms/fitness classes, cafes/restaurants/pubs, playgrounds/playcentres/playgroups, live music, and beaches.

Sixteen per cent of respondents referred to the end of the pandemic and related restrictions; this included freedom of movement, less fear, and more financial stability:

*"Looking forward to conversations and news not being about death and restrictions. Looking forward to what life has in store for humanity next, following the research and seeing if society changes in any way."*

*"Not worrying about the health of my family (particularly my parents), not worrying about the impact of the economic downturn on my children and other young people."*

*"Being out! Seeing people without stressing about the latest restrictions or the ethics of going out. Just the freedom of it."*

*"Not having to worry about what I touch and how close I am to people. Being employed again. Having money to make donations and support vulnerable people."*

*"Not feeling alert all the time."*

*"Being able to go about freely without being nervous about getting sick or getting anyone else sick."*

Eleven per cent of respondents were looking forward to physical touch and affection, with almost every response in this category referring to hugging family and friends again. Ten per

cent of respondents were looking forward to being able to travel again, while four per cent were looking forward to time and space away from their immediate families after quarantining together.

*“Nothing! I'm loving this, and the creative ways we are using to connect.”*

*“I hope it doesn't return to the 'same' normal. Many things have to change in our world and now is the time.”*

*“I sincerely hope ‘normal’ evolves somewhat after this, otherwise we are [going to] do this shit over and over.”*

### Positive reflections on relationships during the pandemic

The responses of 362 survey participants were grouped into seven categories (see Table 5).

**Table 5. Respondent’s perceptions of the positive impacts on relationships of social distancing measures, percentage**

| Positive impacts                              | Number of respondents (N) | Percentage of respondents (%) |
|---|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Enhanced communication and connection         | 79                        | 22%                           |
| Support (consideration, compassion, kindness) | 77                        | 21%                           |
| Spending more time together                   | 77                        | 21%                           |
| Staying connected despite the distance        | 51                        | 14%                           |
| We’ve coped well despite the challenges       | 36                        | 10%                           |
| Renewed appreciation/Clearer priorities       | 30                        | 8%                            |
| Nothing                                       | 25                        | 7%                            |

Responses to the question on the benefits of social distancing measures on relationships were more varied. Twenty-two per cent of respondents reported they were happy with the enhanced communication and feelings of connectedness within their relationships:

*“Longer phone calls, everyone connecting in a more focused & authentic way, especially in the early weeks when we were all so worried.”*

*“More time together to talk on a different level that often we don't get to in the daily rush of to and from work and baby duties.”*

*“Connecting in new ways with family.”*

*“All feeling very close, great knowing exactly what the kids are up to school / friendship, etc.”*

*“I feel we are all happier and bonded even more.”*

Twenty-one per cent reported feeling happy with the level of support in their relationships; this included reporting that their significant others and/or the wider community were showing more consideration, compassion, and kindness towards one another:

*“We have learned a lot about how we manage stress and how best to support each other.”*

*“We have been very considerate of each other and I think we have come to understand the importance of being able to depend on each other in difficult times.”*

*“We’re there for each other. We’re more tolerant of each other’s feelings and empathise a bit more.”*

*“Incredibly happy with the way we are supporting each other in whatever way we can - grandkids supporting grandparents with IT, adult children supporting parents with shopping etc, adult children supporting neighbours with shopping, mowing lawns. Family thinking of other family and wider community.”*

Twenty-one per cent were enjoying the increased amount of time spent together. Fourteen per cent were happy that they had been able to stay connected to their family and friends, despite being physically isolated from them.

Ten per cent of respondents reported being happy with how well their relationships had coped with the challenges, particularly those quarantining in the same house together:

*“We get on well together - care, respect, love hasn't changed.”*

*“My partner and I are having a great time together despite the conditions. We laugh a lot!”*

*“That my partner and I enjoy each other's company rather than growing tired of each other!”*

*“Getting along quite well despite extra time spent together.”*

Eight per cent reported that the pandemic had given them a renewed sense of appreciation of their relationships with loved ones. This included those who said they had a clearer idea now of who was important to them, who cared about them, and which relationships they wanted to focus their attention on moving forward:



**Table 6. Respondent’s perceptions of the negative impacts on relationships, percentage**

| Negative impacts                                    | Number of respondents (N) | Percentage of respondents (%) |
|---|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Nothing   | 77                        | 22%                           |
| Missing physical contact with friends family        | 74                        | 21%                           |
| Conflict/Negativity/Relationship issues             | 66                        | 19%                           |
| Want more/better communication or connection        | 33                        | 9%                            |
| Want more time apart or alone (incl. from children) | 26                        | 7%                            |
| Want more contact with others                       | 26                        | 7%                            |
| Want less use of screens and technology             | 8                         | 2%                            |

Twenty-two per cent of respondents reported that they didn’t want to change anything about their relationships. Twenty-one per cent of respondents yearned for face-to-face or physical contact with their friends and family; this included single respondents using dating apps, who wanted to be able to meet people they had been chatting to in person.

Nineteen per cent of respondents wanted to change the amount of conflict, negativity, or other relationship issues that had been present during the pandemic period:

*“Arguments with my husband. I’ll be amazed if we don’t get a divorce after this.”*

*“My husband lost his job due to covid and spends all day outside in his shed. Doesn’t help with anything around the house or with the kids and is moody and grumpy and drinking much more alcohol than usual.”*

*“Everyone is quicker to annoyance and anger. Young children feeling isolated and frustrated at not being able to play with others increases tantrums and defiance behaviours.”*

*“Taking frustrations out on each other.”*

Nine per cent of respondents wanted to enhance the quality of their communication and connection with loved ones:

*“My partner to listen and hear me and be more supportive around my anxiety.”*

*“More real conversations.”*

*“More deeper connectedness.”*

Seven per cent of respondents wanted more time alone or apart from loved ones. This included parents who expressed wanting more alone time with their spouse, away from the children:

*“Would like to have more time apart, more space to do our own things and then come back together. Not be in each other's space all the time.”*

*“Just some more time to ourselves, being with anyone 24/7 becomes trying.”*

*“Too much time together, feeling slightly suffocated.”*

*“We're at home with older children in a small house. We have no headspace to just focus on our relationship - we usually do date nights or socialise with other couples - no kids.”*

Another seven per cent of respondents wanted to increase the quantity of their contact with loved ones. Many were dissatisfied with the amount of contact and check-ins they had received from their family and friends during the pandemic:

*“Wishing my parents would sometimes contact me instead of expecting me to be the person who makes contact.”*

*“Would like grandkids to contact us on a regular basis.”*

*“Some friends have given me almost none of their time or consideration through this, even if they are on their own as well. I would like them to make more effort to see how I am doing, not just the other way around.”*

Two per cent wanted to reduce the amount of time family members spent using technology, which they felt had gotten out of hand during the pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

Although a large proportion of respondents reported increases in anxiety, low mood, and loneliness, the restrictions and self-isolation enforced due to the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to families spending more quality time together and connecting in deeper and more meaningful ways with their families and the wider community. These results suggested a renewed appreciation for the importance of healthy and positive relationships, something that many hope to retain as they begin to return to the ‘normality’ of everyday life and the driving factor behind the work of Relationships Australia Canberra & Region.

Future research could look at how relationships change as restrictions are eased; will society return to the way it was, or will we retain an enhanced sense of community and togetherness? Will we place a higher priority on spending more quality time with our families? Will more employees elect to continue working from home? Will we continue to use technology to communicate with loved ones, or place a higher value on face-to-face communication?