



Social connectedness and isolation among older Australians

2025

Introduction

National Seniors Australia is a member-based, not-for-profit research and advocacy organisation representing Australians aged 50 and over.

Every year we survey thousands of older people on diverse topics relevant to their lifestyle and wellbeing.

This report is based on a 2024 survey module about social connectedness.

Connecting with our fellow human beings is incredibly important for many of us at all ages.

But later life can often bring new challenges to staying connected.

Older people may stop working, ending a regular element of our social lives. Our friends and partners are more likely to pass away at older ages, leaving us grieving and lonely and sometimes completely alone. If our own bodies become less capable, or if we find ourselves caring full time for a dependent person, we can lose the capacity to meet with those we love. And the list goes on.

The COVID-19 pandemic also presented obstacles to connecting, through both formal restrictions and the threat of the disease itself. In Australia during the first pandemic years, older people were strongly advised to be particularly careful because of greater vulnerability to serious illness if we contracted the virus.

In 2024 the National Seniors Social Survey asked over 5000 older Australians about these issues to get a sense of their social connectedness and isolation. This short report examines the results. We asked four questions, with the option for respondents to comment on their answers as well.

The four topics we asked older Australians about were:

- The pandemic's impact on their social connections today
- Any barriers they face to getting out and about
- Their level of loneliness
- Their level of contentment with how they spend their time.

In the following pages we present the results of each in turn and then discuss what it all means when we think about the four together.



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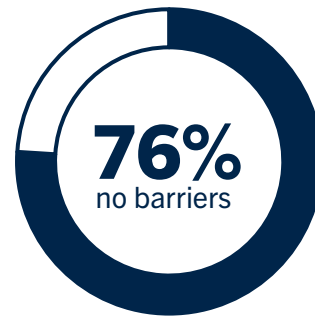


Barriers to getting out and about

n=5069

Most respondents don't experience barriers to getting out and about.

But the rest face a range of obstacles.



Most said nothing prevents them from getting out and about if they want to.

The survey question that addressed barriers to connecting asked: 'What, if anything, prevents you from getting out and about in your local area, town or city?'

Three-quarters of the sample indicated that nothing gets in their way.

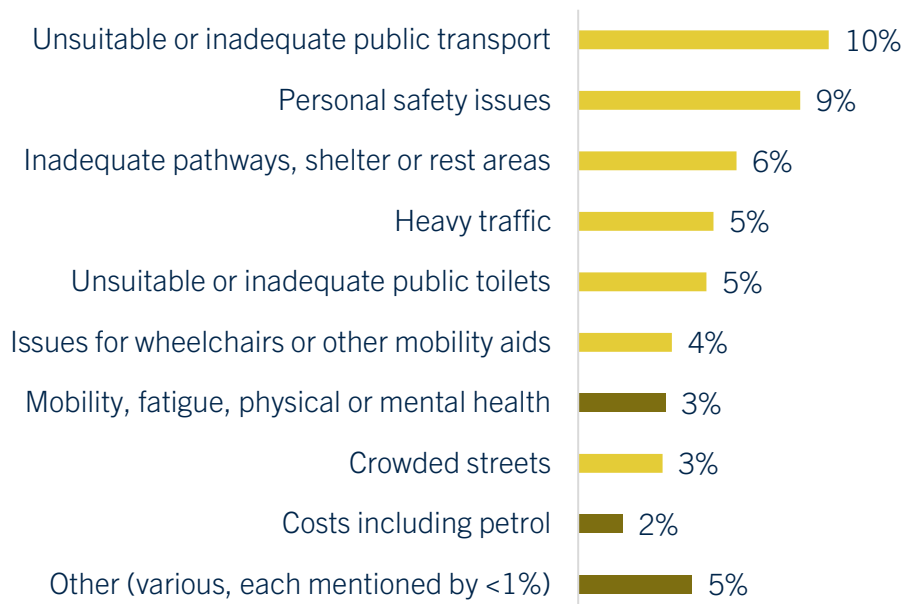
A quarter did identify barriers. They were offered a set list to select from and a comment box to add barriers not in the list. They could select all that applied.

Poor public transport and safety concerns were the top responses, each selected by 9-10% of the total sample.

The top theme among the 608 comments was the barrier posed by poor physical health, mobility, mental health or fatigue. This was separate from the accessibility issues flagged among the set options.

Cost was the second-top theme in comments, with petrol costs singled out by many commenters.

The rest identified a range of barriers, selecting from the listed options (light bars) or outlining other barriers in a comment (dark bars).



Barriers to getting out and about

Some commenters identified new barriers not listed among the set options.

Arthritis limits my ability to stand and queue, to walk anything but the shortest distances, limits how far I can drive (especially in heavy traffic or twisty turny roads)

Mental health - I am agoraphobic.

My lack of income has meant I no longer have any vehicle or ability to pay for fuel

Anxiety, chronic headaches and cost of petrol to town

Depressed, obese and no money... better to stay cocooned at home

I need Carers to be with my wife before I am able to go out

Difficulty getting to public transport, steep terrain, lack of parking near stations, unreliable car, access drive to house too steep to walk up and difficult to drive up due to a landslip 2years ago

can't drive due to physical constraints ... can't use public transport for same reason. I can only go out if my husband or someone else drives me

Difficulty leaving my husband for long periods.

The place bores me. The beaches are dull. The traffic is bad. The weather is not conducive most of the time to being outdoors. And at present I do not even have my own car. Nowhere to walk from here. I hate my life.

Other commenters elaborated on why one of the listed barriers was a problem.

Footpaths crowded with parked cars that also drive up and across the footpath. Many don't look for pedestrians much less acknowledge or slow down. Vehicles in practice have absolute right of way at all times on footpath.

I require access to toilets that I have to go to urgently a challenge. My cancer related incontinence can be managed. The footpaths are tripping hazards for people like me

I use a mobility scooter often to do supermarket shopping in off peak times. Many of the kerb and channeling and footpaths is hopelessly suited and poorly maintained to facilitate a mobility device.

Persistent roadworks restrict access to footpaths or bike paths suitable for mobility scooters.

Seating everywhere appears too low for me plus lots have no arm rails to help me up and I am sure this affects a lot of people

Not enough disabled toilets or even toilets in parks

THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH PUBLIC HANDICAPPED TOILETS

Unshaded paths are a big disincentive to walking in summer

Regaining connections post-pandemic

n=5077

Most respondents whose social connections were disrupted by COVID have regained them. Some never lost them.



One survey question touched on the social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic over these years: 'We know that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted social connections for some people. Have you been able to regain social connections that were disrupted by COVID-19?'

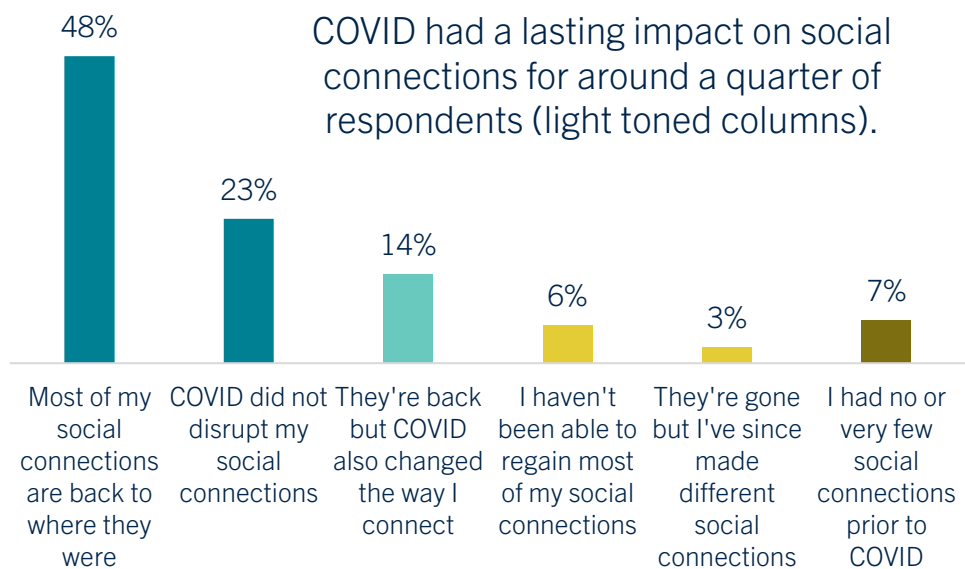
Around half the sample had regained disrupted connections. Around a quarter said their connections were never disrupted by the pandemic.

Fourteen percent said COVID had changed the way they connected despite regaining lost connections.

Around a tenth could not regain connections they lost, but some made other connections instead.

In total, 559 people added a comment to elaborate. Topics ranged from complaints about COVID vaccines to non-COVID disruptions to socialising, and everything in between. But some were about COVID impacts on socialising.

Most maintained or regained social connections disrupted by COVID.



Regaining connections post-pandemic

Some commenters' social connections were not affected by COVID.

As a supermarket worker we were considered essential workers so still had lots of social contact

During Covid when physical contact was limited, I/we maintained contact via the internet with family, friends and colleagues

I am happy with my own company

There was a brief disruption but it is now back to what it was.

I lived in a gated community in a regional country area during Covid and we weren't restricted at much.

I live within 5km of all my family members

We followed directions and now we're able to resume all activities

My late husband was sick. He had dementia. I didn't interact with many people because of this so covid restrictions didn't affect us much

Others have changed they way they connect since COVID.

Always concerned socialising in groups. Or visiting homes.

An awareness of another's preference for social distancing - I don't assume physical contact is automatic

I moved house during covid to a more connected community in a rural location

Relationship ended mainly due to Covid conditions and restrictions.

Many of my friends/relatives died during Covid period. Many more faded away...

The social branch I attended was disbanded due to Covid 19.

Family disagreement over my choices changed the way I connect with my family

Have become more wary of non-vaccinated and anti-vaxxer connections.

Face to face guitar group we ran is now permanently on zoom. COVID meant we felt it best to move closer to family in the city leaving many close friends in the regional area we moved from. It has been difficult to establish deep friendships like the ones we had in our regional town.

Connections have changed... social media has taken over to the [detriment] of all

I am hesitant to join groups face to face

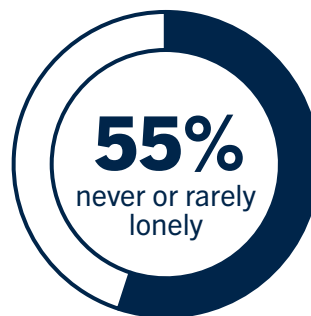
Less connection with grandchildren and children as covid meant didn't see them, babysitting stopped.

I feel less inclined to entertain at home. When we couldn't during Covid, I lost my enthusiasm for the work involved in entertaining.

Loneliness

n=5097

Slightly over half said they were never or rarely lonely, but 18% said they were lonely some or most of the time.



Most did not feel lonely often.

A simple survey question asked respondents: ‘How often do you feel lonely in your life?’ They were given a five-point scale on which to answer, plus an optional comment box to elaborate.

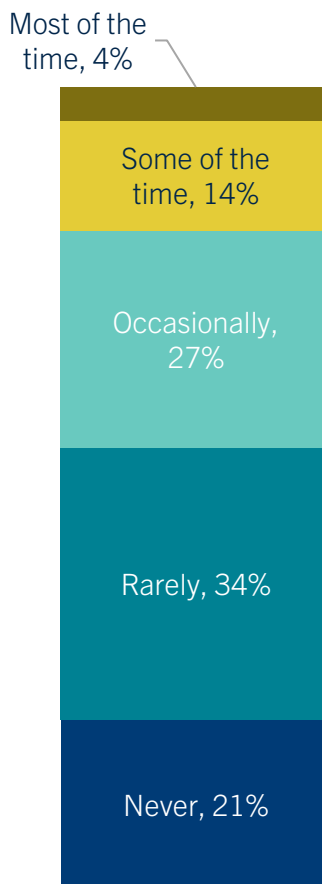
More than half said they were never or only rarely lonely, and another quarter were lonely occasionally.

That left a small but sizeable minority who said they felt lonely some or most of the time.

Just over 600 people make a comment that explained the causes of their loneliness and/or the reasons they were not lonely.

Unsurprisingly, positive relationships with partners, family, friends, pets and communities were among the loneliness antidotes. The absence of these due to death, disagreement or distance were among the causes of loneliness. People also connected loneliness to boredom, a lack of activity, and facing problems alone.

But just under a fifth felt lonely some or most of the time.



Loneliness

Loneliness or lack of it was frequently linked to spouse relationships.

Been married for 54 years and have great relationship with my wife.

I cannot talk easily to my partner due to his confusion.

I miss my deceased husband.

On odd occasions my wife goes to camps with her quilting friends. I am good for about a week but it gets a bit lonely after that.

I am happy in my own company and have a supportive spouse. We both love to read, research and learn.

It was also often linked to other relationships or contented solitude.

I visit friends and workmates from 30 years ago and even take others to meet as a group but none ever come to see me. I get disappointed.

I can live without a partner but not without my dog.

Always alone but never lonely thank goodness.

Do not see family & friends as much as i would like

As a Christian my experience is I have never felt lonely due to my faith in my Heavenly Father, is Holy Word full of promises, and Church attendance when I can get there, which is not often.

Lucky! Have an amazing family.

I wish my family members lived closer.

I have lived in this town 6 years struggle to get friends.

Some strongly linked keeping busy and being positive to not feeling lonely.

Have loads to do. Have both my daughters nearby and am always busy

Not lonely as you can always find something to do or meet someone

I lost my husband a year ago Yes I do feel lonely living by myself But life is what it is and sad as I am I try and make the best of every day by keeping busy And trying hard to stay positive Hard as it is at times life was not meant to be easy !

Days are always busy with home activities or hobbies.

I am very active. Always things to do and people to meet or catch-up up with

I am too busy running a seniors ukulele group, getting new material, finding the appropriate keys to play and sing in, teach the strumming required, and arranging 62 concerts a year.

I have many hobbies and an infrequent self-employed teaching job, I have a garden which requires much tending and thus can keep gainfully occupied when not liaising with people.

I have a positive and happy disposition. There is enough sadness around without me adding to it.

Contentment with how time is spent

n=5123

The vast majority of respondents were content with how they spend their time but a tenth want to make big changes.



Most were content or generally content with how they spend their time.

But a tenth want radical change.

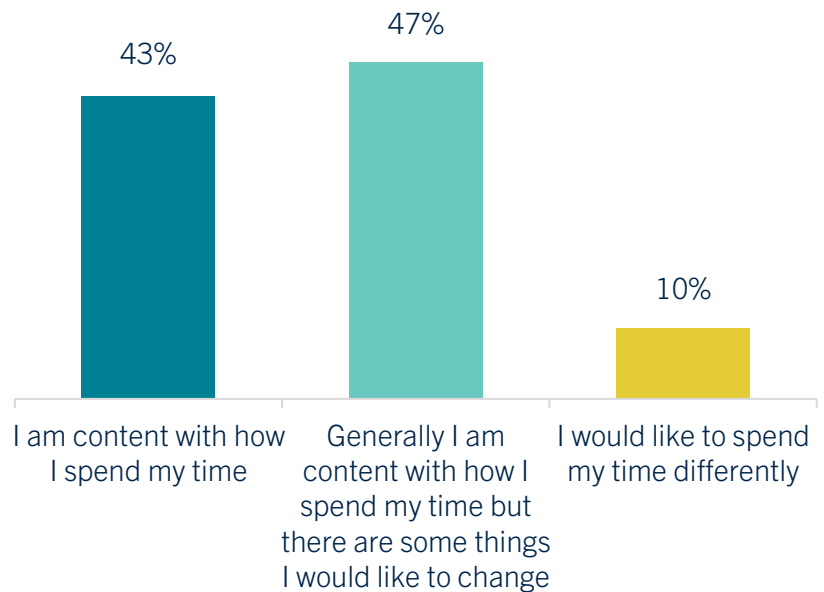
The fourth question related to social connection and isolation asked: 'Overall, are you content with how you spend your time most days?' They were offered an optional comment box to elaborate on their answer.

Two-fifths of the sample said they were content, and no change is needed.

Almost half said they were generally content, but there are changes they would like to make. The changes these respondents said they wanted were generally small in scale – more time for this, less time on that, or a tweak to another aspect of life.

The remaining tenth said they are not content with how they spend their time. Their comments generally indicated that they wanted larger scale changes, such as freedom from chronic pain, from work, from caring duties, from loneliness, bad relationships or boredom.

Those with poorer health, less savings, disabilities, or a younger age were over-represented in this group.



Contentment with how time is spent

Many respondents wanted to make relatively small, manageable changes to their lives.

I would like to socialise more.

I would like to spend more time exercising as part of a group

I would like to spend more time in travel, but I also feel I have voluntary contributions to make.

I would like to go out more e.g. to the library or swimming pool. Working on that.

I would like to spend more time with my grandchildren.

I would like to do some part time work

I would like to do arts and crafts but at the moment they are on hold. I'm going to be able to start doing them in a couple of years.

Ten percent of respondents wanted major changes in their lives. Sadly, some would welcome death (content warning, bottom row).

Lonely, lacking purpose

Lonely, often at a loss as what to do.

Lonely, disconnected

Bored

I loved gardening and travel. I can now do neither

I spend considerable amounts of time looking after my wife who has significant health problems. I also spend lots of time checking my emails and responding to correspondence.

No spare money for the extra [to] do something different. Hence why I am looking for work.

Unable to walk very far and would dearly love to take my dog for a daily walk.

Every thing is too hard. I can't do things as quickly as I used to and things just seem to add up and i get tired much quicker then I give up.

Spending most of my time with my husband who has Dementia is beyond sad

No public transport. Difficult in rural area.

would like to engage more with others outside the home

Suddenly living alone after the death of my wife I find that I need to get out of the house and make/meet friends.

My wife and I were self employed for 60 years, now we are in an old peoples home, doing nothing, waiting to pass on.

Would like more free time

Would like to be fully retired

No time for myself, retirement is not what I thought it would as I am doing caring duties for an elderly parent.

I am seriously depressed and think of how to suicide every day.

Would like to do other things

Sadness is all consuming

Summary and conclusions

While on average older Australians seem okay, some individuals are far from it

In this report the numbers and the comments tell different stories.

The percentages we report here show that the majority of older Australians surveyed did not face barriers to getting out and about, did not permanently lose social connections because of COVID, rarely or never feel lonely, and are generally content with how they spend their time.

But the comments demonstrate why it is so valuable to include opportunities for survey participants to write freely about their lives, as well as answering simple set-response questions.

So many individual older people are finding life very difficult in all these ways – getting out and about, connecting with others, avoiding lonely feelings, and being content with the daily activities that make up their lives.

Similar kinds of barriers appeared in comments about all four aspects of connection and isolation that we asked about.

Caring duties are a big one. Those who are the primary carer for a partner, relative or friend often find they cannot get out and about. They lose connections with loved ones outside the caring relationship, as people drift away. They frequently feel lonely even within a relationship if the person they are caring for can no longer respond as they used to. And they are far from content with how their time is spent.

Debilitating impacts of ill health or mobility restrictions are another common theme that

have left many older people feeling isolated and disconnected, and unable to make changes to their situation.

A lack of money can have a similar impact, restricting travel and petrol costs as well as the cost of participating in an activity or socialising outside the home. Or it can lock people into working when they long to retire – restricting their free time to do what they want to do.

A recurring but unexpected association was made between keeping busy and staving off loneliness. In the loneliness question, a surprising number of people implied that keeping busy was the antidote to lonely feelings. Conversely, in the question about contentment with how time is spent, some commenters wrote that loneliness was a problem for how they spend their time. Some of us are happy alone, but others are social creatures who need human contact to thrive.

In any research we read about high levels of happiness and life satisfaction, it is these minority experiences we need to remember. It can still be lonely in a crowd.

In terms of solutions to these problems, they are the same solutions to many problems older people face.

Older people in poverty need better income support.

Older people who are carers need better respite in all its forms.

Older people with health and mobility restrictions need support systems to help them get out and about and maintain social networks.

And all of us need to reach out to find out if our friends, family and neighbours would benefit from a cup of tea and a kind word with another human being.

Methods

The data in this report come from the 12th National Seniors Social Survey, conducted in February 2024. Anyone aged 50 or older residing in Australia was welcome to participate. The survey received ethics approval from Bellberry Ltd prior to implementation (approval 2023-11-1424).

The survey included a module about connections with people, animals and places. Three questions examined in this report are from that module. The question about satisfaction with how time is spent was asked at the end of a module on healthy ageing, which immediately preceded the

connections module. The comments associated with that question indicated its greater relevance to the social connection questions, hence its inclusion here.

Numbers were calculated after excluding the few 'prefer not to say' responses. Comments were analysed using the thematic analysis framework described by Braun and Clarke. We identified themes via inductive analysis guided by a critical realist approach that aimed for accuracy and objectivity in interpreting respondents' views. The number of comments comprising any given theme

was estimated to give a sense of its prominence. The data were not cross-coded so numbers should be treated as estimates only.

Quotes from survey respondents were selected to illustrate some of the variety and prevalence of ideas expressed. Where possible they were reproduced verbatim, occasionally omitting or altering parts for clarity or anonymity (indicated with square brackets []). Minor typos were corrected for readability (no brackets). We retained all other phrasing idiosyncrasies.

Sample

When inviting people to participate, we strived for greater inclusivity and maximising participation, rather than numerical representativeness. For that reason, we characterise the sample below in terms of key demographic traits in case it is desirable to compare the numbers to those of the national population.

The percentages characterise the 5184 respondents who answered one or more questions analysed for this report. No question was compulsory, so some rows do not add up to 100%.

Age group	50-64 years 10%	65-74 years 50%	75-84 years 35%	85+ years (max. 99) 5%
Self-rated health	Excellent 12%	Good 55%	Fair 25%	Poor/very poor 7%
State or territory	ACT 3%	NSW 25%	NT 1%	QLD 32%
	SA 9%	TAS 2%	VIC 18%	WA 10%
Gender	Female 54%		Male 45%	Non-binary 7 people
Education	School up to Year 10 15%	Year 12 or cert/dip 40%		Degree or higher 41%
Savings including super	<\$100k 25%	\$100k-\$500k 24%		>\$500k 32%
Not metro	Regional 26%		Rural 8%	Remote 1%
Self-identified diversity groups	First Nations, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander 1%			LGBTI 2%
	CALD background 2%		Living with disability 7%	Veteran 4%

*Survey data unweighted.

The head office of National Seniors Australia is located in Brisbane/Meanjin but we represent older people from across this great continent.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land and waters in which we operate, the Turrbul People, and all other First Nations, Aboriginal, and Torres Strait Islander people.

We honour and value their continuing cultures, contributions, and connections to Country, and pay our respects to Elders, past and present.

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