

INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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At the Centre for Healthy Brain Ageing (CHeBA), UNSW Sydney, we specialise in researching factors associated with cognitive decline and dementia. Research from the longest running study of human happiness in the world - the Harvard Study of Adult Development- found that loneliness is as bad for our physical health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Social isolation has been listed as a risk factor for dementia in the 2020 Lancet Commission on Dementia, but little was known on this topic. Our research tried to answer the following questions:

1. What kind of social connections do we need to slow down cognitive decline and prevent dementia?
2. How often should we interact with others to slow down cognitive decline and prevent dementia?

To do this, we brought together data for over 40,000 people from around the world who had been followed for several years. We published two meta-analysis papers exploring the associations between social connections and rates of cognitive decline (*The Lancet Healthy Longevity*: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2666-7568\(22\)00199-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2666-7568(22)00199-4)) and risk of mild cognitive impairment, dementia and early mortality (*Alzheimer's & Dementia*: [DOI/10.1002/alz.13072](https://doi.org/10.1002/alz.13072)).

After controlling for known risk factors for dementia, we found that being in a relationship, living with others and weekly interactions with friends/family and the community were associated with slower cognitive decline. We also found that being in a relationship, weekly community engagement, weekly family/friend interactions and *rarely feeling lonely* reduced our risk of mild cognitive impairment. Interacting with family/friends at least monthly and having a confidante reduced our risk of dementia. Living with others, engaging in the community at least annually, and having a confidante reduced our risk of early mortality.

Key messages:

- Stay socially, physically and mentally active for healthy ageing;
- Try to see family or friends at least once a month;
- When you're stressed, talk to someone you trust about your feelings;
- Take part in community activities such as volunteering, lawn bowls, cultural meetings and music groups.

Our results provide specific evidence that can be used by policy makers to advocate for change, and by health professionals to prescribe social activities for healthy ageing.