

Hall & Partners

OPENMIND



# *Men's Social Connectedness*

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# 1. Executive Summary

## Research background

Past studies<sup>1</sup> have shown that social connectedness may be a protective factor against depression for Men in their Middle Years (30-65; hereafter 'men'). Recognising that men often find it difficult to maintain social connections throughout their middle years, *beyondblue*, proudly funded by The Movember Foundation, commissioned this research to understand how men perceive and experience social connectedness, to identify the trigger points and pathways that lead them to lose social connections and to highlight tools that may help them develop stronger ties.

The project adopted a multi-stage, multi-method approach, consisting of: a review of existing literature and interviews with thought leaders and practitioners; 14 qualitative discussion groups; a robust quantitative online survey with 4100 men; online discussion boards with small groups of trans\* and intersex people who identify as men and another, larger group of 'socially vulnerable men' and, finally, 13 ethnographic case studies.

## The broader experience of social disconnectedness

There is a widespread expectation that men in their middle years will experience dissatisfaction with their social lives at some point. Almost seven in ten (69%) agreed that most men will go through a lonely period at some stage, and almost two-thirds (63%) agreed it is normal to lose touch with your friends as you get older – indeed those men who *don't* go through a lonely patch and manage to maintain contact with friends are in the minority.

Nearly a quarter of men (23%, approximately 1.1 million men) in their middle years score low on the Duke Social Support Scale and may be at risk of isolation. Another half of men in their middle years (45%, approximately 2.2 million men) have medium social support. Further:

- Social support appears to dip between the ages of 35 and 54, with respondents outside this age band reporting higher levels of social support.
- One quarter (25%) of men have no one outside their immediate family whom they can rely on.
- Over one in three men (37%) are not satisfied with the quality of their relationships, typically because they do not feel they are emotionally connected or supported.
- Men who feel like they are part of a community are more likely to have strong social support overall.

Despite this relatively normalised experience of social disconnection, lack of social support/loneliness were seen as unimportant compared to other, highly correlated (and indeed probably causally related), social issues such as suicide and depression. This is an unspoken phenomenon: those experiencing it would rarely feel able to bring their 'neediness' up in conversations and it is rarely, if ever, a topic of

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Davidson SK: Social Connectedness and its association with depression outcome among primary care patients. Dissertation Melbourne: University of Melbourne; 2013.

public discourse. These men often lack the skills, the pathways and frequently the drive to remedy their lack of social connection and instead tend to bear the misery and shame of their situation with a stoic, masculine pride.

Social connectedness is clearly an issue for Men in their Middle Years, and, given the association with mental health issues, this research provide evidence that the issue is worthy of substantial support.

### **Drivers and barriers to social connectedness**

Social connection is a complex issue and there are a range of factors including underlying predispositions as well as situational triggers that explain the phenomenon of men experiencing poor social connections in their middle years. Key findings were:

- The men who had experienced periods of loneliness were likely to have friendships based on a common interest or purpose, and contact with friends fell away as participation in these groups (e.g. sporting clubs) ceased.
- A majority (61%) have lost contact with more friends than they would like in the past few years.
- Changes in family circumstances, injury, illness, mental health, finances, change in work circumstances and simply not having the time to maintain relationships were all seen as contributing to the path of becoming dissatisfied with their level of social connectedness.
- Recognising that the unemployed may be particularly at risk of poor social connectedness will help to target men who may be at risk.
- Men who had experienced low levels of emotional openness or engagement with their fathers growing up are more likely to experience poor social support, and good communication between father and son may be a protective factor from social disconnectedness in later life.
- Men also face practical barriers (e.g. financial and health) to increasing their social connections, and any programs need to be understanding of the particular financial restraints and health barriers faced by many of these men. This includes illness and disability, which may be a trigger for poor social connectedness.

Many men want greater openness with their friends and to be able to talk about personal problems, but admit they don't always have the skills or tools to initiate these conversations, or understand how to respond when a friend opens up to them. Specifically:

- Half of men (50%) claim to rarely talk about deeper personal issues with friends, while nearly a third (31%) don't spend much time talking with their friends in general.
- Almost a third of men (31%) wish that they could open up more to their friends and a similar proportion (28%) want friends to open up to them in return.

### Suggested interventions programs and tools

To successfully address the problem at a broader community level, there may be merit in putting social connectedness on the agenda. Rather than framing social isolation as a pathway to psychological distress, *beyondblue* could emphasise its importance as a protective factor. Encouraging men, their partners and the community more broadly to take proactive steps to support strong social connections is a positive message for *beyondblue* to champion.

Social connectedness is not seen as an important social issue by men, and the link to other social issues is not readily recognised or understood. *beyondblue* could facilitate understanding of the association between social connectedness, suicide and depression, further highlighting this important social issue.

Other suggestions include:

- Helping men to build resilience via programs and training for those in danger of becoming disconnected (e.g.: recently unemployed). This has dual benefits – reducing psychological distress, and increasing their ability to maintain and grow relationships through tough times.
- Helping guide men into a variety of social channels. In this way, men can initiate new relationships with like-minded individuals over a shared or common purpose, which will also help provide the relationship 'breadth' from which 'depth' can be built.
- Helping men initiate, conduct and 'own' conversations concerned with personal and emotional issues. Focusing this on how to offer support (while subtly demonstrating acceptable ways of asking for support) is likely to be a more powerful approach.
- Reminding men (and the women in their lives) that men need social connections. Public acknowledgement of the importance of social connectedness, the need to devote some time to improving and developing male-male relationships.
- Programs and tools to help men develop stronger, more robust community networks.

The model of the Men's sheds appeals to men in their middle years, but it is perceived an activity targeted at older men. *beyondblue* could play a role in helping Men's sheds broaden their base and encourage younger members to join. Successful examples of men's groups abound: from Hacker/Maker communities to 'multi-sport' groups and even loose, but broadly inclusive and diverse groups of locals who get together once a month to discuss 'important men's business' at the local watering hole; similarly, there are opportunities to help groups like this expand into other locations.

A new member facilitator, with whom men could meet prior to joining a group, was very compelling for our less connected men; *beyondblue* could play role in providing materials and training; further, a general member facilitator for groups, clubs and teams, for to keep injured, retired or otherwise distanced members connected to the groups will help keep men from becoming disconnected.

While online connections were not felt to be a true alternative for in-person contact, there are nevertheless opportunities to provide men with online tools to improve their social connections through

improving both the quality and closeness of connections (depth), and the number of connections (breadth). Specifically, there is a need for:

- Online tools to guide men through the process of finding and joining appropriate groups and to provide insight into what the experience may be like, making the process less daunting.
- Tools, tips and lessons to help them provide emotional support. This could include tips and examples of how to approach, initiate and maintain difficult, potentially confronting conversations. It should also demonstrate how to provide support for friends or family, and help them identify when, where and how that support might be needed.

Different cultural norms are likely to have a strong impact on men's ability to maintain social connection, and this will need to be taken into account when designing programs for a multicultural society like Australia.





## 2. Background

### 2.1 Research background

Depression is a highly prevalent and disabling condition and represents the greatest single burden of any non-fatal disease in Australia (Mathers et al, 2000)<sup>2</sup>. People with depression suffer significant psychological distress, experience impairment across all aspects of their lives and are at increased risk of suicide (Harris & Barraclough, 1997<sup>3</sup>; Patton et al 2010<sup>4</sup>).

Men in their middle years are particularly at risk of suicide and, as such, are the focus of *beyondblue*'s current initiative, with support from The Movember Foundation.

A considerable body of research indicates that social connectedness is a protective factor against depression (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001)<sup>5</sup>. People with higher levels of social connectedness are less likely to develop depression and, if they do develop depression, they are less likely to experience persistent and recurrent episodes (Davidson, 2013<sup>6</sup>; Teo et al). Their research suggests that strengthening social connectedness among men in their middle years may reduce the incidence of depression which, in turn, may reduce the risk of suicide.

Empirical research<sup>7,8,9</sup> indicates that social connectedness can be conceptualised as comprising three independent domains:

1. Attachment Relationships – indicates the availability of close relationships, e.g. spouse, children, siblings
2. Integration – indicates the degree to which an individual is immersed in a social network and the broader community
3. Perceptions – indicates an individual's subjective appraisal of the adequacy of their social connectedness, such as their level of satisfaction with their social connections.

The last of these, which measures people's perceptions of whether they have somebody they can talk to about things that matter to them, has been shown to be most strongly correlated with mental health

<sup>2</sup> Mathers CD, Vos ET, Stevenson CE, Begg SJ: The Australian Burden of Disease Study: Measuring the loss of health from diseases, injuries and risk factors. *Medical Journal of Australia* 2000, 172(12):592-596.

<sup>3</sup> Harris EC, Barraclough B: Suicide as an outcome for mental disorders: A meta-analysis. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 1997, 170:205-228.

<sup>4</sup> Patton GC, Coffey C, Posterino M, Carlin JB, Bowes G: Life events and early onset depression: cause or consequence? *Psychological Medicine* 2003, 33(7):1203-1210.

<sup>5</sup> Kawachi I, Berkman LF: Social ties and mental health. *Journal of Urban Health* 2001, 78(3):458-467.

<sup>6</sup> Davidson SK: Social Connectedness and its association with depression outcome among primary care patients. Dissertation Melbourne: University of Melbourne; 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Davidson SK: Social Connectedness and its association with depression outcome among primary care patients. Dissertation Melbourne: University of Melbourne; 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Duncan-Jones P: The structure of social relationships: Analysis of a survey instrument. *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology* 1981a, 16(2):55-61.

<sup>9</sup> Blazer DG: Social support and mortality in an elderly community population. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina; 1980.

issues. The evidence points to the importance of *strengthening existing ties*, not just building new ones – though for some there will be a need to build broader social integration so as to *enable* improvements in the quality of relationships.

While there is a considerable body of academic literature examining the impact of social connectedness on mental health, including a focus on men, this has not necessarily been developed with specific, practical intervention outcomes in mind.

## 2.2 Objectives

*beyondblue* has developed its expertise in taking macro sociological issues and bringing these into the personal domain, so as to be able to effect real change. This research built on the existing literature, but the focus is the perspective of men themselves – how they perceive and experience poor social connectedness, the trigger points and pathways that lead them there and, crucially, the interventions (such as programs or tools) that have helped them, or which might have a real impact in the future.

The objectives of the project were to:

- Identify the barriers impacting the social connectedness of Men in their Middle Years;
- Identify the factors which facilitate social connectedness of Men in their Middle Years and have a positive impact on their mental health;
- Point to specific enabling strategies for Men in their Middle Years to connect socially; and
- Provide any other information which could help inform the design and approach of future social connectedness initiatives for Men in their Middle Years.

## 2.3 Methodology

The project adopted a multi-stage, multi-method approach to reach the projects aims.

### Stage 1: Knowledge audit

The knowledge audit informed the subsequent phases of the research by refining the scope of the research and specific research questions. The knowledge audit ensured that the study built on current knowledge and understanding.

The first step was to review relevant academic and 'grey' literature, targeting reports which evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. This included formal and informal evaluations of programs, projects and strategies aimed at increasing social connectedness. Men in their middle years were the focus, although programs targeting the general population, women, and other age groups were included where relevant to explore underlying themes and identify gaps in programs targeting men. In total, 45 documents from five countries and a range of perspectives were covered. Also investigated in detail were eight relevant strategies aimed at improving social connectedness.

Experts from Australia, the U.K. and the U.S. were interviewed about their work and thoughts on social connection, and interventions in particular. The seven interviews took the form of qualitative depth

interviews (up to 45 minutes each in duration) and were conducted by our most senior project team members. The interviews were conducted with individuals who were identified as able to provide key, relevant insights into social connectedness, with views on possible strategies for improving connectedness. The perspectives/organisations interviewed were:

- Men's Sheds/University of Ballarat
- Men's relationship counsellor
- Alcoholics Anonymous
- National Seniors Australia
- Sporting Organization
- Samaritans UK
- Sign For Work

### **Stage 2: Qualitative discussion groups**

The purpose of the discussion groups was to take the 'macro sociological perspective' of much of the literature and translate this into what it means at the level of the lived experience of the individual – with the very practical rationale that *beyondblue* needs access to the personal narrative in order to be able to discern and hone potential opportunities for interventions. The qualitative findings informed the quantitative stage of the research (stage 3).

Fieldwork was conducted between 20<sup>th</sup> Feb and 5<sup>th</sup> March 2014 and included 11 group discussions with men aged between 30 and 65 and 3 group discussions with women of the same age. The men who participated had experienced feeling intensely lonely and disconnected from others but were now in a better place and no longer felt so alone. Men with wide-ranging life experiences participated, including those who had been through separation, custody battles, financial strains, job loss and retirement or other triggers that led them to feeling socially disconnected. The women in the groups had a close friend/ex-partner or family member whom they saw as being socially disconnected.

The groups were held in Melbourne metro, regional VIC, Sydney metro, regional NSW and Brisbane metro locations. Participants included culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) individuals and represented low, mid and blue-collar socio-economic backgrounds. We also conducted two groups with unemployed men and two groups with homosexual/bisexual men.

The groups covered:

- General orientation to the topic of social connection
- Retracing the journey that led to them feeling alone and/or disconnected
- The language and conceptual frameworks men use to discuss and make sense of the experience of social disconnection and loneliness
- Identification and evaluation of interventions and ways to help get men back on track

### Stage 3: Quantitative Survey

This phase was designed to allow the depth of insight garnered at previous stages to be tested with the broader population of Males in their Middle Years, and set in place a solid empirical foundation on which to base interventions designed to help with social connectedness.

Fieldwork was conducted between 28th March and 14th April 2014, with 3750 men aged between 30 and 65 across Australia (in metro, regional, rural and remote locations). Boost samples of 300 men aged between 18-29 years and 50 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) respondents were also collected during fieldwork. All respondents completed a 20 minute online survey. Further details about the method are included below.

### Methodology

Data was collected online, in order to reduce social desirability bias, increase representativeness and sample size, and allow for a longer survey without compromising data quality. Multiple providers were used to minimise panel bias.

### Sampling

The quantitative survey was based on a large sample of men aged 30 to 65 years, nationally representative by age (seven five-year age brackets), state/territory and location (metropolitan, regional and rural).<sup>10</sup> A 'comparison sample' of those aged 18-29 years was also included to unpack what happens between the two age bands to drive lower levels of social connectedness. A boost sample of 50 ATSI respondents was also included.

The following quotas were placed on our survey:

Figure 1 : Sample Quotas

Age bracket	Proportion of sample	Number of interviews
30-34	15%	551
35-39	14%	528
40-44	15%	569
45-49	14%	531
50-54	14%	532
55-59	13%	501
60-65	14%	538
Total	100%	3,750

<sup>10</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013). *Estimated resident population by age and sex at 30 June 2012* (3101.0).

State/Territory	Proportion of sample	Number of interviews
ACT	2%	78
NSW	32%	1210
NT	0%	12
QLD	20%	762
SA	7%	266
TAS	2%	77
VIC	25%	949
WA	11%	396
Total	100%	3,750

And further, by remoteness area:

Age bracket	Proportion of sample	Number of interviews
A capital city	68%	2551
A regional centre	20%	751
A country town	9%	349
A rural or remote locality	3%	99
Total	100%	3,750

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed by Hall & Partners | Open Mind in collaboration with *beyondblue*. It included validated instruments for depression and anxiety and drew on the existing literature for questions around social connectedness to ensure that findings were robust and useful.

The questionnaire used the insights from the qualitative phase, and covered:

- Awareness of social issues
- Measures of social support
- Experience of life events
- Formation of friendships
- General attitudes (help-seeking, stigma, adherence to male stereotypes)
- Interventions and barriers
- Demographics

### Analysis

Data was weighted to region, age and state using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011 Census of Population and Housing. Significance tests were conducted at the 95% confidence level. A number of high-level statistical techniques, including segmentation analysis and structural equation modelling, were applied to the data.

#### **Stage 4: Ethnographic exploration**

Ethnographic case studies were conducted to explore and bring to life the segments identified in the quantitative stage. Each of the 13 ethnographies consisted of an initial set-up meeting, a video diary where the men recorded typical social interactions and how they were feeling during the day, and then a one hour depth interview, which explored their experiences in detail.

A total of six trans\* and six intersex individuals who identified as male participated in two separate online forum/bulletin boards over a three day period. The participants were recruited through *beyondblue*'s networks and had various levels of involvement in the trans\* and intersex communities. This relatively low number of participants is explained by the difficulties commonly found in recruiting this group<sup>11</sup>. Alternate strategies are typically adopted to engage with trans\* and intersex individuals, hence the online forums approach.

An online bulletin board of men with lower DSSI scores and high K10 scores ran over three days on our proprietary platform YourWord™ between 20<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2014. It sought to further uncover the experience of the most vulnerable and explore the impact of additional program and strategy ideas developed during earlier stages of research.

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<sup>11</sup> Leonard, W., Pitts, M., Mitchell, A., Lyons, A., Smith, A., Patel, S., & Barrett, A. (2012). *Private Lives 2: The second national survey of the health and wellbeing of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) Australians*. Monograph Series Number 86. Melbourne: The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University.





## 3. Social connectedness in Australia


### 3.1 What's the relationship between social support and mental health?

#### Summary:

This research confirmed the relationship between social connectedness and psychological distress. Poor social connectedness is correlated with higher levels of depression and anxiety symptoms. Whilst resilience is the most important preventative factor against psychological distress, satisfaction with relationships – which is positively driven by social support and negatively via social drift – is shown here to be an important preventative factor.

#### Detail:

The online discussion board with vulnerable men shed light on the link between poor social connections and mental health issues. Many of these men believed their mental health issues were often the cause (or at a least strong driver) of their experiences of poor social connection.



*“Sadly at the moment I cannot work due to anxiety, social panic attacks. I have suffered from Depression for a long time... I guess because of what has happened it has made me anti-social and not want to be around people...”*

*“Struggle badly with depression and anxiety... at home by myself most of the time (wife works) and feel very alone and worthless these days. No longer work (Disability Pension) and all my old mates have either moved away or died. Used to have good self-esteem but not anymore with not earning money, not driving, sporting skills gone”*

*“Mental health issues stand in the way. Arguably poor friendships and family resulted in a mental health diagnosis, but also could be that diagnosis resulted in lost friendships”*

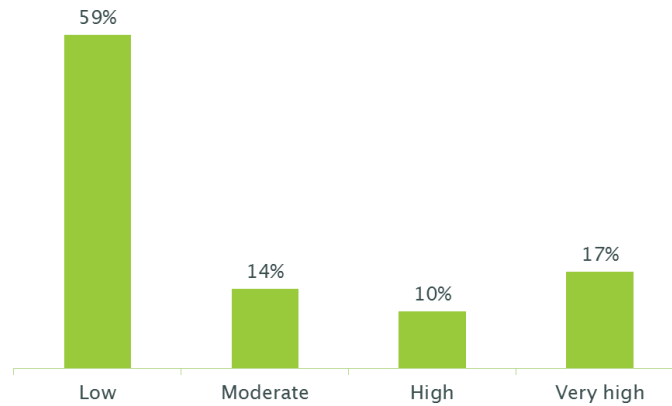
*“A major suicide attempt on my part cost me many (about 70%) of my friends and made family members hostile”*

*“Social phobia - I personally try hard to be sociable, only to be given the feeling that I'm outright rejected by most of whom I talk to”*

The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, or K10, is a validated checklist measuring depression and anxiety, or psychological distress. Given the link between social connection and mental health problems, the K10 checklist was included in the quantitative survey to further explore this relationship among Men in the Middle Years.

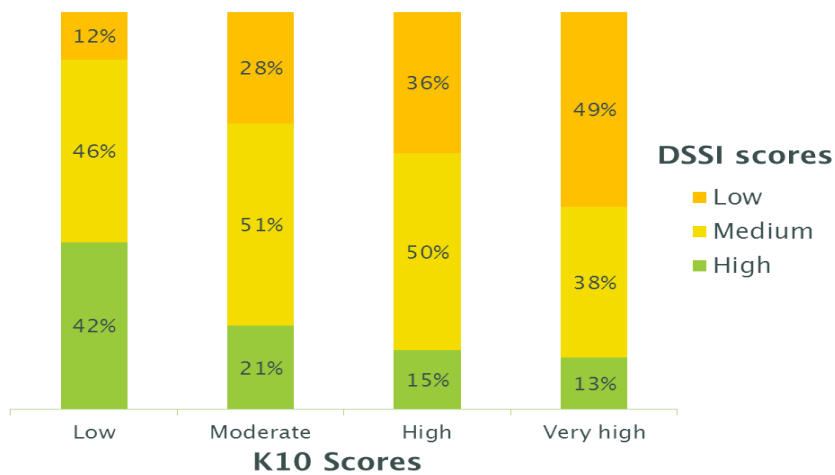
Almost six in ten (59%) of men had K10 scores indicating low depression and anxiety, and just under one in five (17%) or around 830,000 men in Australia had scores related to very high signs of depression and anxiety<sup>12</sup>.

Figure 2: K10 scores



It was hypothesised that the relationships between social connectedness, psychological distress and resilience would be strong, and our findings show that these are indeed highly correlated. **Error! Reference source not found.** shows that men with low social support (low DSSI scores) are more likely to be experiencing very high psychological distress. Men with strong social support are more likely to have low levels of psychological distress.

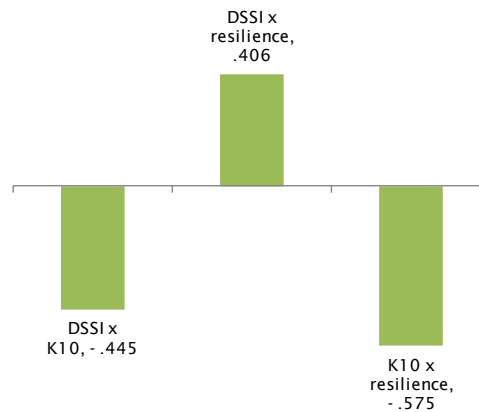
Figure 3: K10 scores by social support scores



The significant ( $p < 0.005$ ) correlation statistics in Figure 4 shows that social support is positively correlated with resilience, and negatively correlated with psychological distress. Resilience is also negatively correlated with psychological distress.

<sup>12</sup> The breaks used: Low (scores 10-19), Moderate (scores 20-24), High (scores 25-29), Very high (scores 30-50)

Figure 4: Correlations between social support, psychological distress and resilience



Bivariate correlation analysis (Pearson statistic), Base: All respondents, n=3750

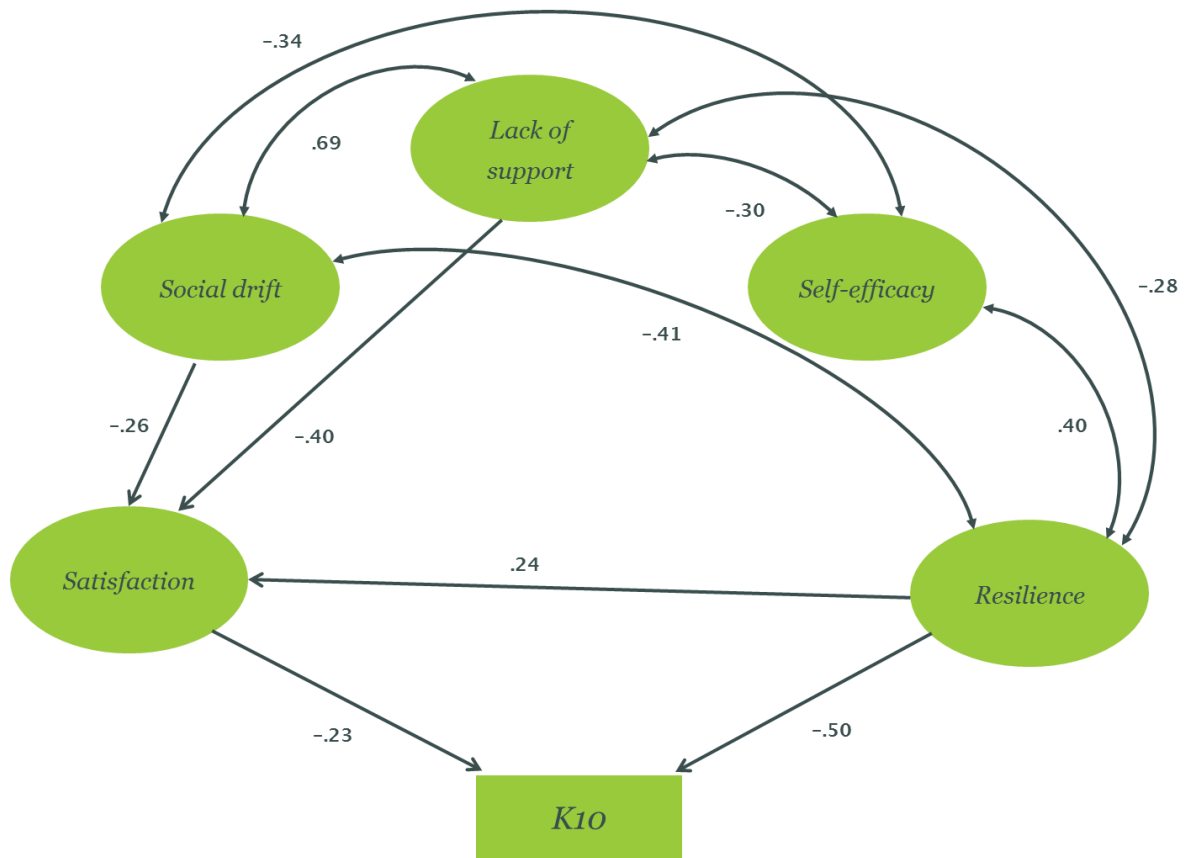
The relationship between social support, satisfaction with social connectedness and psychological distress (the K10 score) was further explored using structural equation modelling. A satisfactory model (RMSEA 0.048, SRMR 0.036) including Satisfaction with relationships, Resilience, Self-efficacy, Lack of support (which increases as support falls) and Social drift (which increases as perceptions of friends moving away and community connections failing increases) was developed to estimate the influences of these factors on psychological distress. Details are included in Appendix.

The modelling identifies resilience as the strongest influence on psychological distress, with higher levels of resilience reducing K10 scores; however, psychological distress is also directly affected by satisfaction with relationships, with higher levels of satisfaction driving lower K10 scores. Satisfaction is directly driven down by lack of social support and social drift.

The effects of social support (lack of support) and social drift are mediated through satisfaction; that is, they influence psychological distress mostly through their impact on satisfaction, although they are also related to the other factors in the expected ways.

The hypotheses that social support, self-efficacy and social drift directly influence psychological distress were not supported by the data. The notions of hegemonic masculinity measured in the survey were found not to correlate strongly with either social satisfaction or psychological distress as measured through the K10.

Figure 5: Model of socially-mediated psychological distress (standardised effects)



The model suggests that psychological distress can be directly reduced by increasing levels of social satisfaction and, most importantly, by helping men to build resilience – the ability to bounce back and take control of their lives after bad situations, and not retreat into the ‘man cave’.

Increasing satisfaction with social bonds can be achieved through helping men maintain old connections and establish new ones (countering social drift) and through improving the quality of their relationships, ensuring they are able to both provide and be provided with emotional support from their friends.

#### Strategic Implications:

Building resilience in men will help encourage satisfying relationships and protect against psychological distress.

Asking men to personally identify whether they feel ‘completely satisfied’ with their level of social connectedness – and to do something about it if they don’t – may be a way of reaching those at risk.

## 3.2 Profiling social connection in Australia

### 3.2.1 Are men aware of the issue of social disconnectedness?

#### Summary:

Men acknowledge the importance of strong social connectedness and the majority (73%) believe that most men have at least one close friend they can rely on. Despite this, there seems to be a widespread (69%) but unspoken expectation that many men will experience dissatisfaction with their social connectedness at some point. Men recognise that social disconnectedness can be a difficult experience for the individual, but not that it is a wider social issue.

#### Detail:

The men participating in qualitative discussion groups<sup>13</sup> feel the experience of poor social connectedness was common, but unspoken; an acknowledgement that while many men go through periods of dissatisfaction with their social connections, there is a distinct lack of general conversation about the issue. Those who have experienced poor social connectedness, or know someone who has, recognise this as a very serious issue for the *individual* involved, but they don't necessarily extrapolate to the broader societal level.

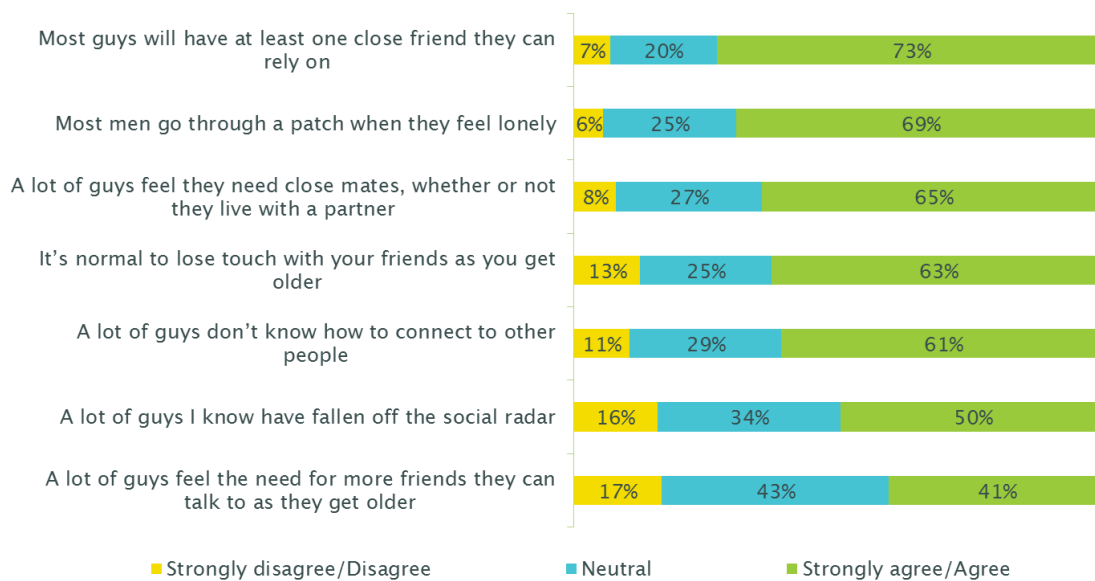
This result was also borne out via the online survey, where widespread recognition and a perceived normalisation of the broader characteristics of male social disconnection were noted. Figure 6 shows that almost seven in ten (69%) agree that 'most men will go through a lonely period at some stage', and almost two-thirds (63%) agree that 'it is normal to lose touch with your friends as you get older'. Half (50%) agree that 'a lot of guys they knew had fallen off the social radar', and around four in ten (41%) agree that 'a lot of guys feel the need for more friends they can talk to as they get older'.

There is also a strong expectation, however, that most men have at least one close friend they can rely on (73%). Here, there is evidence that men who work full time may experience social connection differently to those who are unemployed – those working in full time employment were more likely to believe that most men have at least one close friend they can rely on (76% agreed) than men who are unemployed and looking for work (66%), the unemployed not looking for work (58%) and those on a disability pension (64%). The relationship between employment status and social connection is explored further in section **Error! Reference source not found.** There were no significant differences by age or state.

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<sup>13</sup> Who were recruited to have experienced periods of dissatisfaction with their level of social connection in the past, but to be feeling better about it

Figure 6: Expectation of social connections



G6. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements Base: All respondents, n=3750

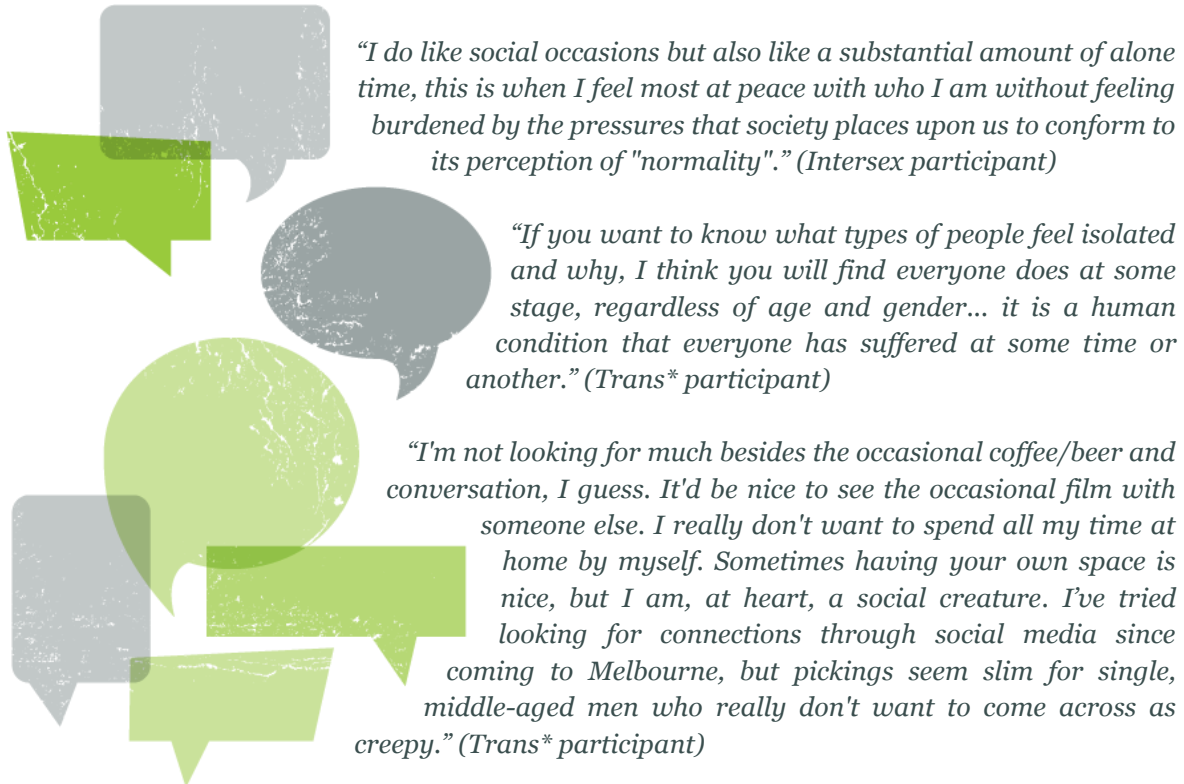
When exploring the experiences of gay and bisexual people in the qualitative discussion groups, the level of social acceptance of their sexuality and ingrained biases in the rest of the community are, they feel, the main reasons gay and bisexual men experience social disconnection.

However, some of these men feel that the greater difficulties in forming a family and having children experienced by gay and bisexual men can also impact on their levels of social support over the longer term. In particular, the men we spoke with felt their lower likelihood of having a family reduces their opportunities to expand their network of close familial ties.

The quantitative results were mixed: gay and bisexual men were slightly more likely to agree (46%) that 'a lot of guys feel the need for more friends as they get older'; three-quarters (75%) agreed that 'most men go through a patch when they feel lonely'; and nearly seven in ten (69%) agreed that 'a lot of guys don't know how to connect to other people'. On the other measures presented in this section, there were no significant differences between straight and gay/bisexual men.

From the online discussion boards, trans\* and intersex participants identified social isolation as an issue in both of these communities, and most participants feel they have experienced social isolation, either currently or in the past. The men describe a range of levels of social connection – some were self-identified 'hermits', while others felt that they were sociable, but were unhappy about their level of connection. Most believe periods of isolation are a fairly common experience at any age.

*"I can be a bit of a loner sometimes but I like that. I like to purposely shut myself away from the world for a few hours every so often. Before I was married I would quite often enjoy entire weekends with no social interaction." (Intersex participant)*

**Strategic Implication:**

Recognising that broad but unspoken awareness and experience of widespread social disconnection exists will allow information, programs and activities to be more readily accepted and adopted by men.


**3.2.2 How important an issue do men feel social disconnection is?****Summary:**

Despite expecting that many men will go through periods of poor social connectedness, lack of social support and loneliness is not seen as important relative to other social issues facing Australia (some of which, such as depression and suicide, may be influenced by poor social support). With the connection to these other issues not readily understood, or explicitly discussed, social connectedness is unlikely to garner much attention from the media, reinforcing its unspoken nature.

**Detail:**

Men in our quantitative survey did not rate lack of social support and isolation as an important social issue (an average of 4.0 on a scale of 0 = least important to 10 = most important). Only erosion of masculinity was rated as less important amongst the 11 issues considered (see Figure 7). Violence was the highest ranked issue (6.5), closely followed by suicide (6.3) and depression/mental health issues (6.1).

Figure 7: Most important social issues facing Australian men today



		Average ranking
1	Violence	6.5
2	Suicide	6.3
3	Depression/Mental health issues	6.1
4	Alcohol/drug addiction	5.8
5	Unemployment	5.6
6	Physical health issues	5.0
7	Discrimination	4.4
8	Gambling	4.3
9	Stress	4.2
10	Lack of social support/loneliness	4.0
11	Erosion of masculinity	2.8

*C1. Below are some of the things other people have said are important social issues. Please rate them from 0 to 10 where 10 is the most important and 0 the least important issue.  
Base: All respondents, n=3750*

There were some differences by sub-groups. Men living with a partner (regardless of whether this was with or without children) are significantly less likely to rate lack of social support/isolation as an issue (mean 3.8) than other groups (men living on their own - 4.3, living with friends - 4.5, and living with parents/family - 4.4). Gay/bisexual men were significantly more likely to rate lack of social support/loneliness (4.4) and discrimination (4.8) as important issues, although violence was seen as a less pressing problem (mean 6.0) among this group.

The highly ranked issues (violence, suicide and depression/mental health issues) are likely correlated with social isolation and poor social connection; and when prompted in our qualitative groups, the link to male suicide was acknowledged and accepted. However, poor social support and isolation is not a topic men talk about easily, nor is it discussed much in society as a whole. As such it is not recognised as a significant issue, nor a factor in many other social issues. Therefore it may be less salient, and seen as less important relative to other social issues. If the link to depression and mental health issues was more explicit, arguably social connectedness may be seen as more important.

**Strategic Implication:**

Social connectedness is not seen as an important social issue by men, and the link to other social issues is not readily recognised or understood. *beyondblue* could facilitate understanding of the association between social connectedness, suicide and depression, highlighting this important social issue.



### 3.2.3 How does the social connectedness of men vary across the population?

#### Summary:

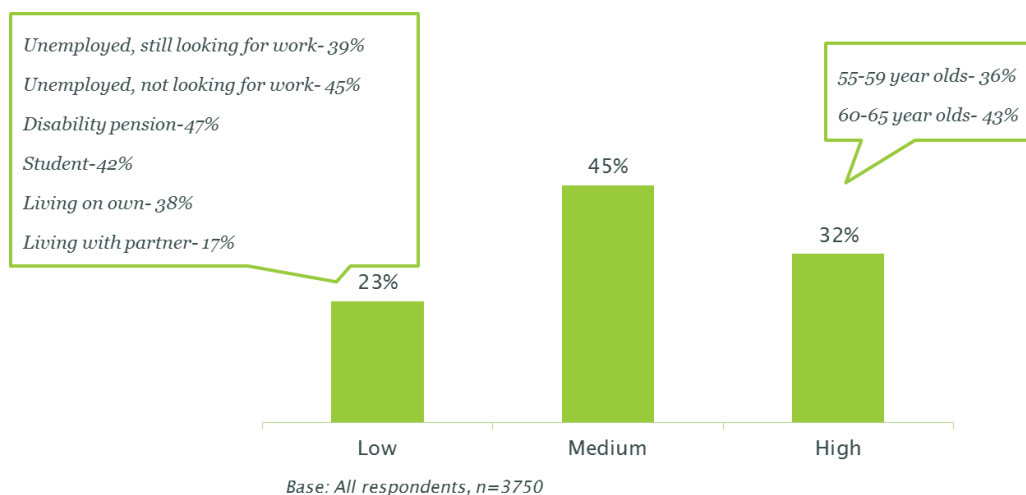
The Duke Social Support Index (DSSI) was used to profile social connection in men in Australia. Through this instrument, the scale and diversity of the issues are highlighted: just over two-thirds (68%) of men in their middle years have medium or poor social support, measured both through objective social interactions and satisfaction with their social support. Social connectedness appears to decline in the middle years; men from ATSI backgrounds tend to have slightly lower levels of social support, while men from CALD backgrounds tend to experience stronger social support.

#### Detail:

The Duke Social Support Index (DSSI) – a validated measure of social interaction and social support – was used to profile social connection in men in their middle years. The overall mean was 23.8 on a scale of 11 to 32. To provide an illustrative portrait, a man scoring 24 (approximately an average score) on the DSSI would on average meet someone outside of their home twice a week, talk to friends/family on the phone four times a week, have 1-2 people they feel close to, and would not be completely satisfied with the kinds of relationships they have with family and friends.

This research suggests that nearly a quarter (23%) of men in their middle years have poor social connectedness (scored low<sup>14</sup> on the DSSI), equating to around 1.1 million men in Australia. Almost another half (45%) (or approximately 2.2 million men) had a medium level of support and so also find some aspect of their social connectedness unfulfilling (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: DSSI Scores

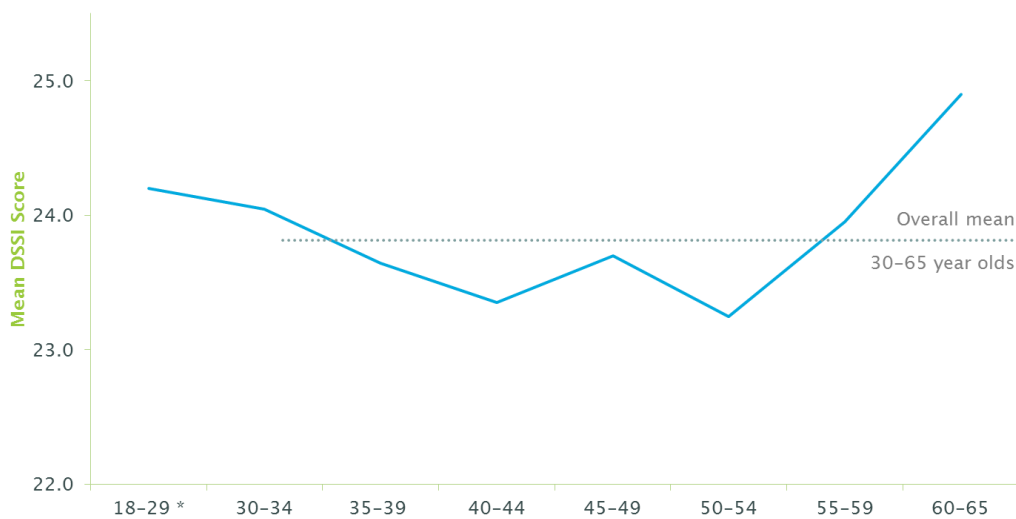


<sup>14</sup> The breaks used for analysis were: Low range (scores 11-20), Medium range (21-26) and High range (27-32).

Men who were unemployed, students and those on a disability pension report lower social support than full time employees. Men who identified as bisexual have lower social support (34% in the low range, mean 22.6) than men who identified as heterosexual (22% in the low range, mean 23.9). Men from ATSI backgrounds report slightly lower levels of social support (30% in the low range, mean 22.8). Perhaps surprisingly, there were no differences between metropolitan and regional locations.

There were also differences by age; those at the younger and older end of the spectrum were more likely to experience higher levels of social support. This supports the hypothesis that social connectedness declines in the middle years, with lower social support scores reported by respondents between the ages of 35 and 54.

Figure 9: Social support by age



Mean DSSI Score  
Base: 30-65 year olds, n=3750 \*18-29 year olds unweighted n=300

Men from a CALD background (as identified by speaking a language other than English at home) tend to experience stronger social support (19% in the low range compared to 24% from non-CALD backgrounds, a mean of 24.1). Those living with a partner also tend to have higher levels of support (35% in the high range, mean 24.4) than those living on their own (24%, mean 22.2) or with parents or family (17%, mean 22.0).

In our broader conversations, gay men also highlighted an age-related shift in their social connectedness. The data from our survey do support the notion that social connectedness may be more of an age-related issue within the gay community; however, given the smaller sample size of this group the finding is indicative only – and perhaps worthy of further research. Between the ages of 40 and 55, gay men were more likely to experience low social support (i.e.: 34% of gay men 40-44 experience low social support, compared to 26% of straight men) than straight men.

**Strategic Implications:**

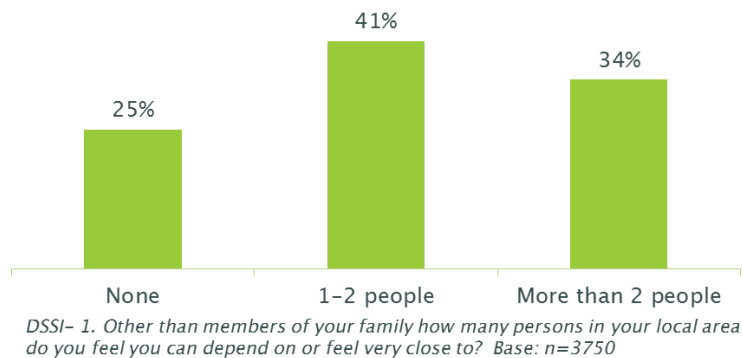
Social connectedness is an issue for Men in their Middle Years, with around a million men in Australia experiencing poor social connections. Given the association with mental health issues, there is evidence here that the issue is worthy of substantial support.

Different cultural norms are likely to have a strong impact on men's ability to maintain social connection, and this will need to be taken into account when designing programs for a multicultural society like Australia.

### 3.2.4 How many interactions do men have, and what is the quality of these interactions?

The DSSI is comprised of a number of measures that provide additional insights into the patterns of men's social connectedness. The social interaction sub-scale assesses the number of interactions men have. Most men (75%) had at least one person in their local area, other than a family member, on whom they felt they could depend, or felt close to. However, somewhat worryingly, one quarter (25%) had no one in their local area outside their immediate family on whom they could depend.

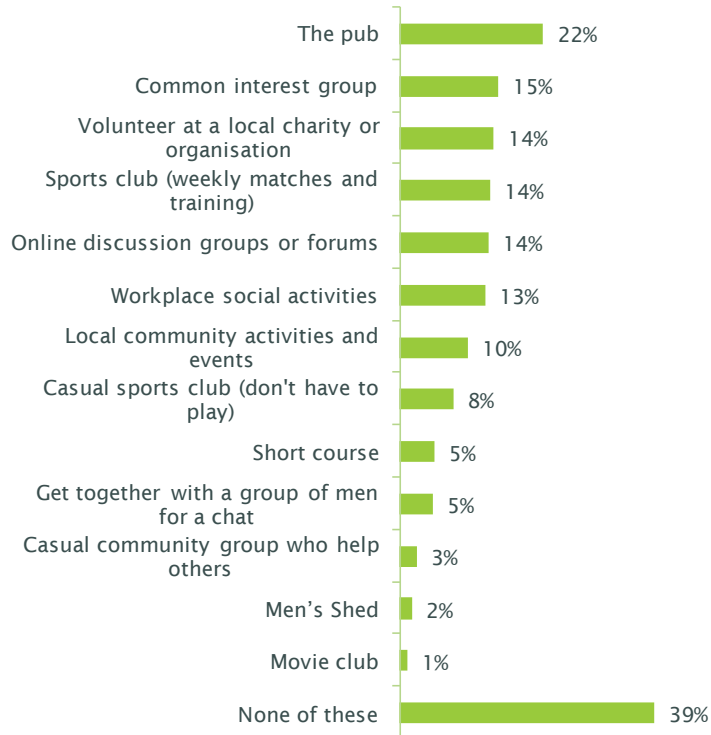
Figure 10: Number of people close to/depend on



Men socialise outside their homes on average twice a week (visiting or going out with others). They talked to someone (friends, relatives or others) on the telephone on average four times a week. Almost two-thirds (64%) did not attend any meetings of clubs, religious meetings or other groups that they belong to.

When asked about the types of activities men take part in, a large proportion of men (39%) claimed that they were not involved in any of the listed social activities.

Figure 11: Current social activities



J8. Which of the following do you do? Base: All respondents, n=3750

Of those who are involved, the pub was the most commonly mentioned activity (22%) followed by common interest groups (15%), volunteering (14%) and playing with a sports club (14%); it is suggested that the pub was the most commonly mentioned activity due to its lower level of involvement and commitment compared to most other suggested activities.

Importantly, when compared with the activities and programs they are likely to consider (detailed in **Error! Reference source not found.**), there is a clear gap – many men appear to be willing to do something about their social connectedness, but do not.

**Strategic Implication:**

With a quarter of men in their middle years having no one outside their family in their local area they can depend on, there is a need to help men initiate and form local connections – and to ensure a number of different avenues are available.

### 3.2.5 How satisfied are men with their level of social connectedness?

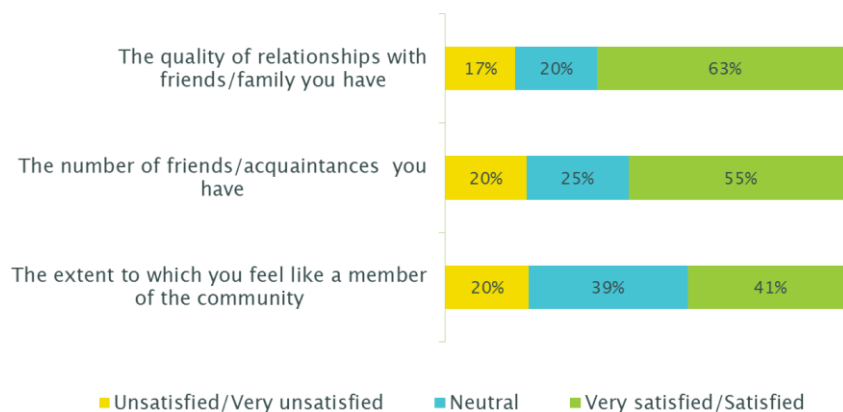
#### Summary:

A key aspect of social isolation is perception, or satisfaction with social connections (Davidson, 2013; Teo et al, 2013; Blazer 1980<sup>15</sup>; Duncan-Jones et al, 1981<sup>16</sup>). Almost half (45%) of men are not able to say they are satisfied with the number of social connections they have; over one in three men (37%) are not satisfied with the quality of their relationships. One in six (16%) have never been satisfied with their level of social connectedness.

#### Detail:

This research highlights the scale and depth of the problem, with millions of Australian men likely in need of improvements in both the breadth and depth of their relationships, before they can say they are 'satisfied'. While nearly two-thirds (63%) of men were satisfied with the quality of their relationships, fewer (55%) were satisfied with the number of friends and acquaintances, and one in five were unsatisfied with the number of acquaintances they have. Importantly, only four in ten (41%) of men in their middle years were satisfied with the extent to which they feel like a member of the community, highlighting a clear need for community development and engagement activity.

Figure 12: Satisfaction with connections



D13. How satisfied are you with...? Base: All respondents, n=3750

Those retired or working full time were more likely to be satisfied with the quality of relationships (71% and 67% respectively) than those who are unemployed (46%) or on disability support pension (40%). Those aged 60-65 were significantly more likely (73%) to be satisfied than the younger cohorts. Those who identify as gay or bisexual were less likely to be satisfied (56%) with the quality of their

<sup>15</sup> Blazer DG: Social support and mortality in an elderly community population. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina; 1980.

<sup>16</sup> Duncan-Jones P: The structure of social relationships: Analysis of a survey instrument. Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology 1981a, 16(2):55-61.

relationships, but were equally satisfied with the number of friends and acquaintances they have and the extent to which they feel like a member of the community.

The satisfaction with social support subscale of the DSSI (Figure 13) measures how men feel about their networks. Worryingly, nearly a quarter of men (23%) can ‘hardly ever’ talk about their deepest problems with at least some of their family and friends while around four in ten (39%) can do so ‘some of the time’ – highlighting broader issues with the quality of male relationships

**Figure 13: Satisfaction with social support subscale**

	Hardly ever	Some of the time	Most of the time
Does it seem that your family and friends (people who are important to you) understand you	10%	44%	47%
Do you feel useful to your family and friends (people important to you)	9%	37%	54%
Do you know what is going on with your family and friends	9%	47%	44%
When you are talking with your family and friends, do you feel you are being listened to	8%	41%	52%
Do you feel you have a definite role (place) in your family and among your friends	12%	34%	54%
Can you talk about your deepest problems with at least some of your family and friends	23%	39%	38%

**Strategic Implication:**  
 Providing men with the tools to help them initiate a deeper level of conversation, including being able to talk about their problems and difficulties, should help to improve their satisfaction with the quality of their relationships.

### 3.2.6 What is the impact of connections with the community?

**Summary:**

Men who feel like they are part of a community are more likely to have strong social support overall. Men with low social support on average disagree that they know lots of people in the community.

**Detail:**

Overall, around a third (34%) of men agree that they feel like they are part of the community with a similar proportion (32%) not feeling like they are part of the community. Men who were satisfied or very satisfied with their level of community membership had significantly stronger social support than men who were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied (DSSI score of 26.1 compared to 20.2).

Figure 14 shows that men with stronger support were more likely to feel like they are part of the community (mean agreement of 3.5 compared to mean agreement of 2.3 for those with low social support), and tended to have a higher agreement that they knew lots of people in the community (3.4 compared to 2.2). Those with high social support were also more likely to agree that they would like more opportunity to give back to the community.

**Figure 14: Community involvement by social support**

Level of agreement with statement (mean score out of 5)	DSSI		
	Low	Medium	High
I would like more opportunity to give back to the community	3.1	3.2	3.3
I know lots of the people in my community	2.2	2.8	3.4
I feel like I’m part of a community	2.3	3.0	3.5

**Strategic Implications:**

There is a clear need for community development and engagement activity, and for programs and tools to help men integrate and develop community networks.

Given the association between community connection and social support, *beyondblue* could encourage men in their middle years to strengthen their involvement and develop their networks in the community.



### 3.3 Social connectedness segments

The purpose of the segmentation described here was to understand whether, in terms of patterns of socialisation and reaction to proposed interventions, there are any naturally occurring groups within the population. These hypothesised groupings can then be used to further refine interventions and develop strategies to better meet the different needs of each segment.

It must be noted here that demographic variables (age, location) were not strong discriminators of men’s reaction to intervention models, or indeed to their patterns of socialisation. In practice, this meant that these variables were not useful in helping to find natural groupings based around reactions to interventions and socialisation patterns. Although different segments have different demographic ‘skews,’ there are men from every age bracket and every location in each segment.

In this section we briefly describe each segment and the social support profile of each.

A detailed explanation of the segmentation analysis is included in section **Error! Reference source not found.** of the Appendix. The segments were identified in the quantitative survey, and then explored further in our ethnographic case studies. Recommendations and a summary for each segment is provided in section **Error! Reference source not found.**

Figure 15: The six segment solution



**Summary:**

Provided in this section is a brief overview of each segment, and a review of their social support and interaction profiles. Each segment is explored more fully in the chapters below.

- The *Quiet and Content* segment makes up 21% of this population, and while they do not have a large social network they appear to be highly satisfied with the friendships they have. They focus more on the few close friendships they have that allow them to open up emotionally, rather than spending time with acquaintances and more casual conversation.
- The *Detrimentially Disengaged* segment is the most socially disconnected in this solution and represents 20% of the 30-65 male population. They have the lowest ability to maintain existing friendships and initiate new ones. While they are not satisfied with their social life, they have many barriers to making it better, and are unlikely to take the steps to do so.
- The *Relaxed Charismatics* (17% of the population) are the segment with the strongest social networks. They have a high ability to maintain old friendships and initiate new ones.
- *Social Strivers* (15% of the population) have low satisfaction with their social connections and find it difficult to initiate and maintain friendships. Unlike the Detrimentially Disengaged segment, they want to be able to change this, but aren't sure how to do so.
- The *Whateverers* segment (14% of the population) sees some value in having a rich social life, although it is not a priority for them; they tend to have fewer social connections outside of family and work.
- The *Loose Connectors* make up 13% of the population. They are socially active, yet stressed about maintaining a 'good' social life. They are focused on meeting new people and initiating new friendships. Relationships tend to be casual acquaintances rather than the close friends they crave.

**Detail:**

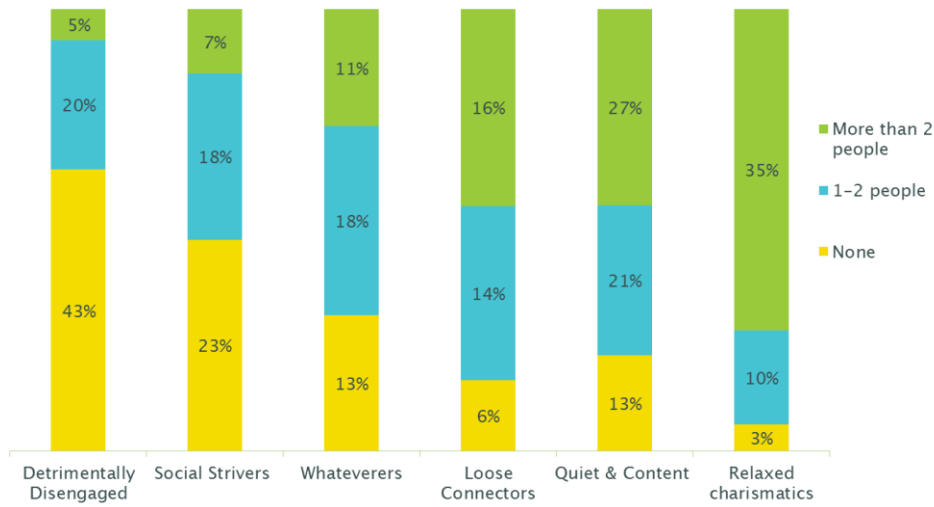
Exploring the social connection profile provides additional insights into the attitudes and behaviour of each segment. The Detrimentially Disengaged had the lowest levels of social support (19.0) followed by the Social Strivers (21.1) and the Whateverers (23.4). Relaxed Charismatics experienced the strongest social support.

**Figure 16: DSSI Score by segment**

	Segments					
	Detrimentially Disengaged	Social Strivers	Whateverers	Loose Connectors	Quiet & Content	Relaxed charismatics
DSSI Average Score	19.0	21.1	23.4	25.3	26.1	28.4

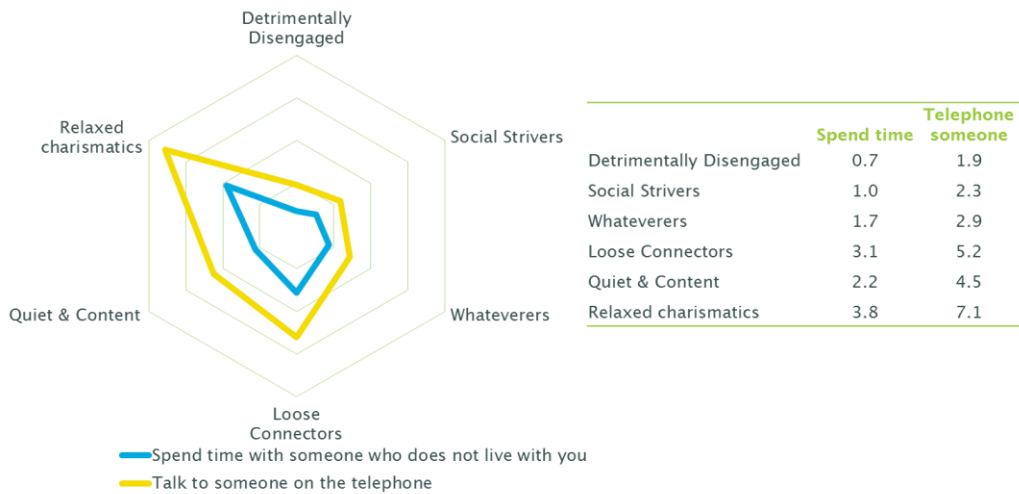
The social interaction subscales highlight key differences in segments, with the Detrimentially Disengaged and Social Strivers having fewer people they are close to or can depend on (Figure 17). Similarly, these two segments have fewer social interactions on average than the other segments (Figure 18).

Figure 17: Number of people close to/depend on by segment



DSSI -1. Other than members of your family how many persons in your local area do you feel you can depend on or feel very close to?  
 Base: All respondents, n=3750

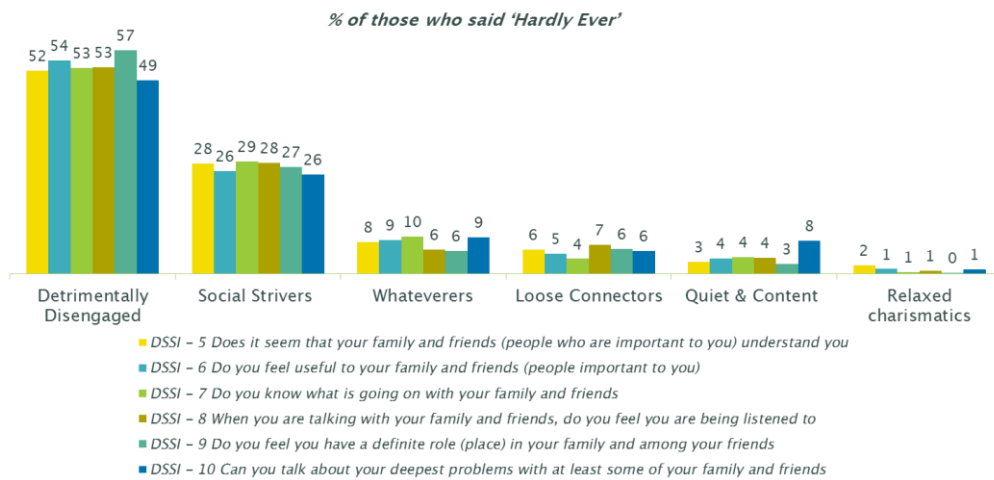
Figure 18: Number of social interactions by segment



DSSI -2. How many times during the past week did you spend time with someone who does not live with you, that is, you went to see them or they came to visit you or you went out together  
 DSSI -3. How many times did you talk to someone (friends, relatives or others) on the telephone in the past week (either they called you, or you called them)  
 Base: All respondents, n=3750

Figure 19 clearly shows that the Detrimentially Disengaged and Social Strivers are far more likely than the other segments to 'hardly ever' feel useful, listened to or understood, know what is going on, have a role, or talk about problems with family or friends. These two segments are particularly at risk of social isolation and exclusion.

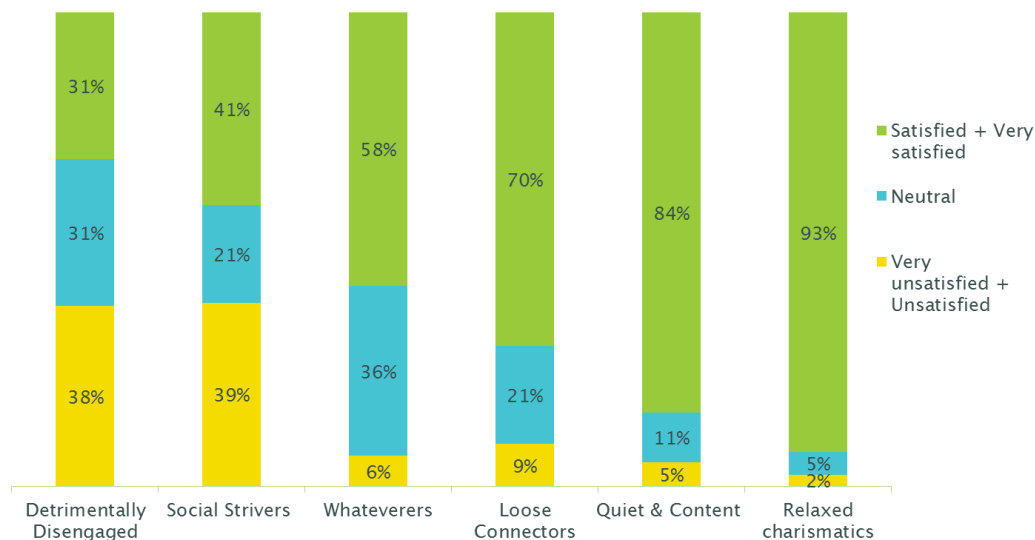
Figure 19: Satisfaction with social support sub-scale by segments



Base: All respondents, n=3750

The Detrimentially Disengaged and Social Strivers are also the least satisfied with their level of social connection (38% and 39% respectively are unsatisfied/very unsatisfied), while the Relaxed Charismatics are the most satisfied (93% satisfied/very satisfied), followed by the Quiet and Content (84% satisfied/very satisfied).

Figure 20: Satisfaction with quality of relationships by segment



D13. How satisfied are you with the quality of relationships Base: All respondents, n=3750

Exploring the different attitudes and approaches to social connectedness helps to further understand the segments. Nearly three-quarters of the Detrimentially Disengaged segment (73%) and two-thirds (65%) of the Social Strivers segment agreed that they have always found it difficult to meet people, compared to only one in fourteen (7%) of the Relaxed Charismatics.

**Figure 21: Patterns of behaviour by segment**

% agree/strongly agree with statements	Segments					
	Detrimentially Disengaged	Social Strivers	Whateverers	Loose Connectors	Quiet & Content	Relaxed charismatics
I have less tolerance for people as I've gotten older	67%	59%	36%	54%	53%	28%
I'm not one to initiate or start up a new friendship but I am happy to follow along	62%	60%	31%	45%	42%	15%
I've always found it difficult to meet new people	73%	65%	24%	40%	34%	7%
None of my friends or I are particularly good at making the first call or arranging a get together	55%	57%	21%	47%	34%	12%
I don't have many friends and I like it that way	46%	32%	27%	27%	32%	11%
I actively seek out opportunities to make new friends	5%	19%	9%	49%	10%	41%
I am the one who keeps our social group together and initiates contact	7%	16%	13%	32%	15%	26%



## 4. Barriers and facilitators to social connection

### 4.1 What are the patterns and behaviours relating to men's emotional engagement with friends, and does this meet their needs?

#### 4.1.1 How do men typically form friendships?


##### Summary:

It is commonly accepted that men have more difficulty connecting with one another at a more intimate or personal level compared to women. Men who have higher levels of social support are more likely to form friendships in a wide variety of ways; however, qualitatively, men who experience periods of loneliness were likely to have friendships based on a common interest or purpose, and contact with friends typically fell away as participation in these groups ceased.

##### Detail:

In our discussion groups the men, who had experienced periods of loneliness, appeared to remain very reliant on friendships they formed in their teens or early twenties, even as they grew older. Often the basis of these friendships was a common interest or shared purpose, such as playing sport or being in a band together, and this appears to create a risk later in life as interests wane or shift with the years.

For instance, a lot of men we spoke to had formed their more important social groups around playing sport: however, as they grew older and physically less fit and able to play, lacked the time or moved away from the team, their involvement declined, and with it the social contact.



*“There wasn’t any reason to keep in contact after I stopped playing [sports]”  
(Male, Unemployed, Sydney)*

*“You can’t connect with the people you normally connect with because you can’t play sport”  
(Male, Low SES, Regional Victoria)*

*“My ex is very into niche sport. That was his social circle. He pulled out and had nothing without them”  
(Female, Melbourne)*

Both men and women in the groups spoke a lot about their impressions of gendered differences in the way each manages their friendships. The beliefs include: that women form friendships for no other reason than because they *like talking* to each other – whereas men are more likely to expect friendships to centre around a common purpose or interest; men are unlikely to ring just for a chat or

to share a problem, whereas women do this regularly. Men therefore have ‘less sticky’, more superficial relationships which are more vulnerable to falling apart than women’s relationships, and simultaneously men have a lot more trouble initiating new friendships with other men.

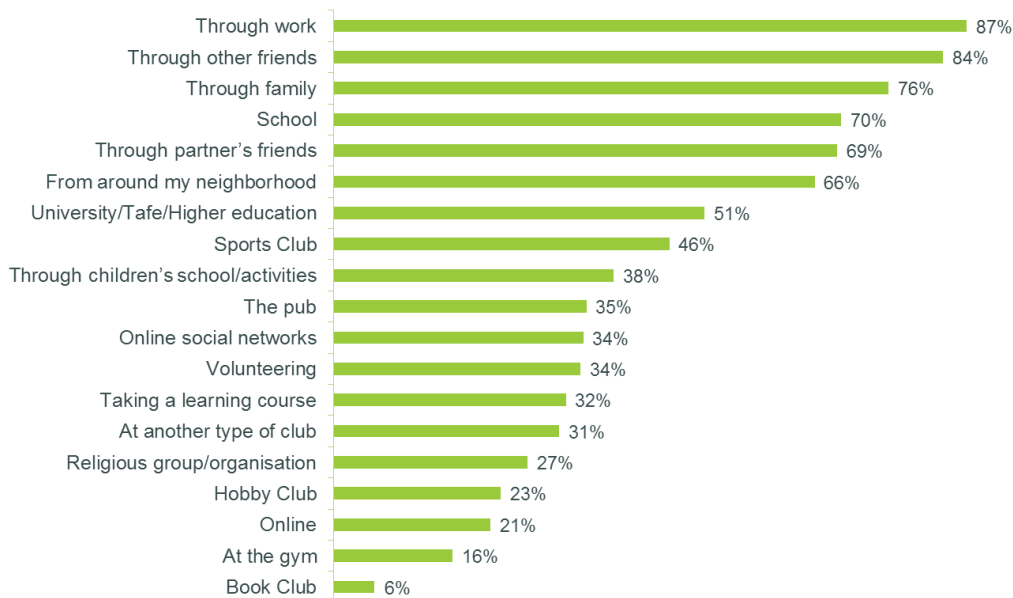
*“Men are meant to solve their own problems. Women share them”*  
 (Male, Melbourne)

*“Men don’t reach out as much as women. We have to do it alone, be strong. You go into a shell when things get tough”*  
 (Male, Melbourne)

*“Men don’t make new friends easily. Women are good at chitchatting”*  
 (Male, CALD, Sydney)

The results of the online survey showed that the top five ways men form friendships are through work (87%), through other friends (84%), family (76%), school (70%), and partner’s friends (69%). It seems many men form friendships via their social connections (i.e. through other friends or through their partner), suggesting that simply having these initial connections helps broaden social networks.

Figure 22: Formation of friendships



F1. For this section, we’d like you to have a think about some of the ways you’ve made friends over the years. Drag the items to the left if you’ve made friends this way, and to the right if you have not.

Work is clearly an important way to meet and build friendships, and this was the most common way men had made friends across all the segments. The Relaxed Charismatics and Loose Connectors were more likely than the other segments to form friendships in a wide variety of ways.



Figure 23: Formation of friendships by segment

	Segments					
	Detrimentially Disengaged	Social Strivers	Whateverers	Loose Connectors	Quiet & Content	Relaxed charismatics
Through work	75%	88%	86%	88%	91%	94%
Through other friends	65%	80%	83%	89%	90%	97%
Through family	53%	69%	79%	87%	82%	93%
School	55%	68%	71%	79%	70%	80%
Through partner’s friends	47%	65%	70%	76%	73%	89%
From around my neighborhood	41%	59%	68%	82%	66%	90%
University/TAFE/Higher education	35%	50%	45%	69%	47%	66%
Sports club	25%	44%	46%	58%	44%	67%
Through children’s school/activities	20%	33%	39%	53%	38%	55%
The pub	20%	33%	33%	47%	32%	49%
Online social networks	25%	34%	32%	55%	27%	42%
Volunteering	15%	34%	30%	55%	24%	55%
Taking a learning course	17%	34%	30%	53%	20%	49%
At another type of club	13%	29%	26%	47%	25%	53%
Religious group/organisation	16%	25%	26%	46%	17%	38%
Hobby club	10%	23%	22%	39%	14%	37%
Online	16%	19%	19%	38%	15%	27%
At the gym	4%	13%	17%	33%	10%	29%
Book club	1%	4%	7%	18%	1%	8%

**Do transgender men form friendships differently?**

In our transgender discussion board, a strong focus was the formation of friendships with people within the trans\* community versus the continuation of existing relationships after transitioning. While several pointed out that they did not want to only socialise with other trans\* men or be defined by their trans\*

*“I would especially like to socialise more with the transgender people I have met over the years who have similar world views to myself. Until I met small and large groups of transgender/cross-dressing/gender queer people, I didn’t really feel I belonged anywhere. Now I have more of a sense of community. But I had to learn the hard way that just because there are many Gender Diverse people out there doesn’t mean that we all have the same values and beliefs. We come from a diversity of backgrounds and from all socio-economic groups and some of us have very different life experiences.”*

status, for many, social connections within the trans\* and gender diverse communities are the primary or sole source of friendships, as existing relationships are often very difficult or painful to maintain.

**Do intersex men form friendships differently?**

Similar to the total population, the intersex respondents on the discussion board form friendships through work, other friends, and through common interests. One’s intersex status is not necessarily something that is shared with friends, and several of the intersex people we spoke with were uncomfortable being publicly known as an

intersex individual. The respondents on the board agreed that being intersex should not define who you are or how others see you.

*“To be honest I don't identify as intersexed, I know I have a condition, but I find the more I think about it, and how it makes me different, the more I get depressed about it. To me it's not an issue, I don't think about it when I meet someone, I think of me as X, not as X the intersexed bloke. Just X. Occasionally when I get close to friends I feel I am not 100% honest with them but then I remember that being intersex does not define me, my personality and my actions do.”*

*“Identifying as intersex and living in small communities is tough. Most folk have limited understanding of such conditions and are mostly unaccepting of differences... making social isolation a preferable option.”*

*“When I ceased trying to hide or being ashamed of being different, people started treating me differently, more accepting of me. Hence, a big advance for me was accepting my intersex state, while not identifying with it or making it the centre of my life. Like others here, my intersex physiology has caused major health problems which for a while caused me to focus on what I could not do.”*

*“I spent many years feeling different and being treated like I was special. I don't want to be special, I want to be part of the crowd and not stand out, as I did when I was a kid.”*



#### **Strategic Implications:**

Men can and do form friendships in a variety of different ways. They are most likely to be successful at building social connection within the support of existing channels, such as work and family, but also neighbourhood events and local institutions.

As with other populations of men, Trans\* and Intersex people are likely to find it easier and more beneficial to connect with others going through similar issues to themselves. Trans\* and intersex participants also identified that negative experiences and exclusion, including stigma, have resulted in barriers to broader socialisation and engagement in the communities they live in. Strategies which aim to increase trans\* and intersex inclusion should be a focus to successfully address the issue at a community level.

### 4.1.2 How do men experience social disconnection, and how does this change as they move through their middle years?

#### Summary:

Half (51%) agree they've got less tolerance for people as they get older; around four in ten (41%) have always found it difficult to meet new people; and two-thirds (61%) have lost contact with more friends than they would like in the past few years. Men experiencing poor social connection generally want to be more socially active and connected, but are not in fact taking steps to initiate or seek out these connections, often lacking the skills and the drive to do much about it.

#### Detail:

As seen in Figure 24, there is a strong sense that for many men the decline in social connections is something that has happened over time, with nearly six out of ten (61%) having lost contact with more people than they would have liked over the past few years.

#### Ethnographic case study:

##### **Quiet and content**

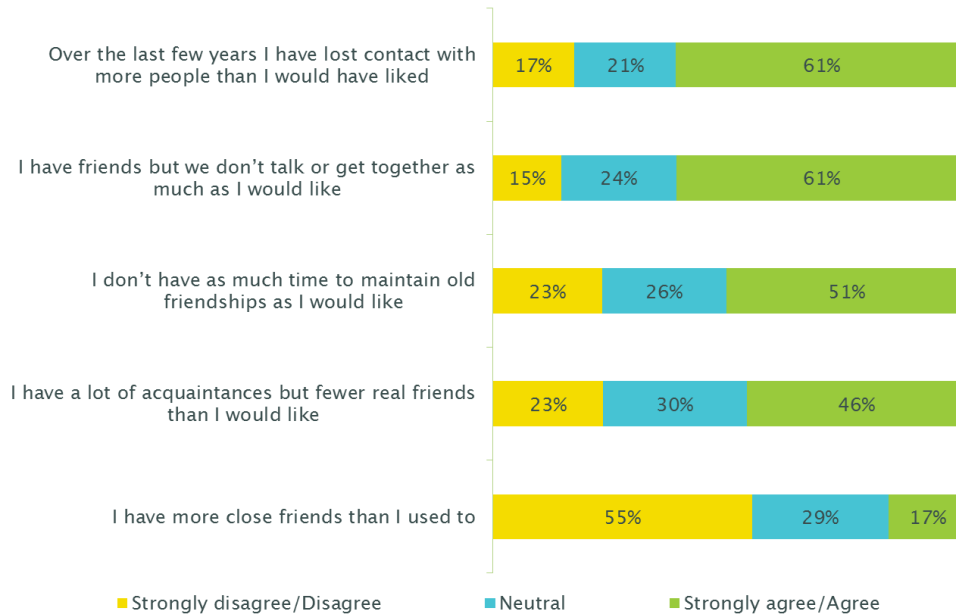
*Paul is a French teacher, and lives with his partner and daughter. Paul likes his work so much that a day spent coaching HSC students was so enjoyable that 'I just wouldn't call that work'. Paul is very involved with local church groups; he describes himself as highly spiritual, having deep friendships with people at church. His involvement with his local church is a means of connecting with like-minded people, and he feels he has benefited emotionally from these.*

*Life, says Paul, can get in the way of reconnecting with old friends. He sees that his own life is very busy, which is a barrier to reconnecting with old friends, but he also has a perception that old friends' lives are too busy to want to, or be able to, maintain a relationship. He also recognises his inability to generate 'small talk' in some circumstances and so prefers to spend time with people he knows well.*

Further, the pace of modern life and the competing demands on the time of men in their middle years places pressure on maintaining quality relationships: half (51%) feel they lack the time to maintain old friendships, while just over six in ten (61%) have friends, but don't talk or get together as often as they would like.

Nearly half (46%) of men agreed that they have many acquaintances but not as many real friends as they would like.

Figure 24: Experiences of social connection among those unsatisfied



G2. Please read the following statements and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree: Base: All respondents, n=3750

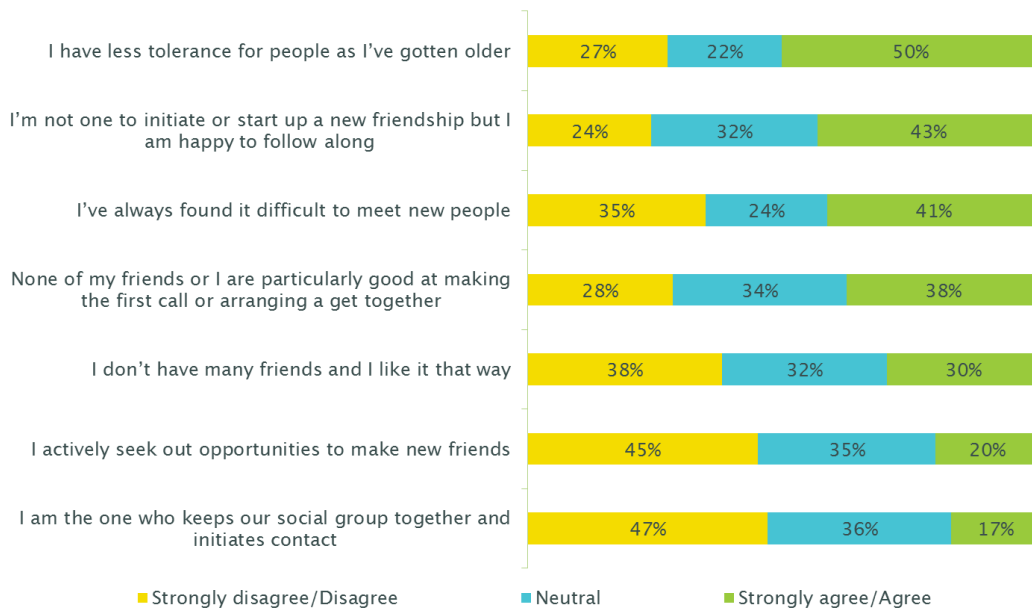
What also emerged from the survey results is a picture of the patterns in men’s behaviour and attitudes to social connections, highlighting some of the potential reasons men may not have as strong connections as they would like.

Half (50%) agree that they have less tolerance for people as they’ve got older, and four out of ten (41%) indicate that they had always found it difficult to meet new people. A similar proportion (43%) agree that they are not one to start or initiate friendships, and only one in five men (20%) actively seek out opportunities to make new friends. Moreover, nearly one in four (38%) agree that neither they nor their friends are good at initiating contact.

**Ethnographic case study:  
Whateverer**

*Participating in this research prompted Steve to reflect on his social connectedness, something which he hasn’t considered too much before. Steven indicates that he is willing to socialise, although this does not happen too frequently. At the end of a long work day he needs “me” time, which for Steve means relaxing at home, listening to music, watching TV, movies and sports. Steve admits that it would be nice to have more social interactions, and the idea of joining a social tennis group appeals, but a lack of drive, or motivation to do anything about his connectedness is likely to prevent him from doing too much about it.*

Figure 25: Patterns of social connection among those unsatisfied



G2. Please read the following statements and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree: Base: All respondents, n=3750

This lack of initiative or drive to meet new people was evident in some men in the groups:



Backing up the earlier findings from the DSSI, men from CALD backgrounds are more socially active than their non-CALD counterparts; they were significantly more likely than non-CALD respondents to actively seek out opportunities to make new friends (35% compared to 18%), to keep their social group together (26% compared to 16%) and have more close friends than they used to (23% compared to 15%). They were also more likely to have friends they are close to (66% compared to 60%) and slightly (but significantly) less likely to have lots of casual acquaintances but fewer real friends than they would like (44% compared to 47%).

Gay/Bisexual men dissatisfied with their level of social connectedness were more likely to agree (53%) that ‘I’ve always found it difficult to meet new people’ and that ‘I have less tolerance for people as I’ve gotten older’ (56%), but also more likely (26%) to agree they ‘actively seek out new opportunities to make friends’.

Nearly a third (30%) of men indicated that they don't have many friends and like it that way. The ethnographic research suggested that some men may in fact desire more or deeper social connections but are unwilling to acknowledge this, either to themselves or others – a protective mechanism built on the image of the stoic man eschewing neediness.

*“Now don't think I'm a lonely man – I'm not – I go out, I salute people in the street... [long pause to end]”  
(Case study, Detrimentially disengaged)*

In our discussion groups, we spoke to a range of men with varying levels of social connection. Hearing that a lot of men in the community experience poor connectedness can be a

*“It's tough – I feel lonely, disconnected... left behind. I'm at a loss. It's very hard for a man to express”  
(Male, Unemployed, Sydney)*

comfort to men who are not satisfied with their level of social connection, and who can feel they are a bit of an oddity. From their perspective, everyone else can seem to have it together and to have no trouble making and keeping friends, while they themselves are the only ones struggling.

Linked to this is the stigma that attaches to being poorly connected to the community: the image of the 'loner', the 'outsider', behaving oddly, shunned and avoided by others because there is something wrong with them.

**Strategic Implication:**  
To successfully address the problem at a broader community level, there may be merit in putting social connectedness on the agenda. Rather than framing social isolation as a pathway to psychological distress, *beyondblue* could emphasise its importance as a protective factor. Encouraging men, their partners and the community more broadly to take proactive steps to support strong social connections is a positive message for *beyondblue* to champion.

### 4.1.3 Why are they dissatisfied?

**Summary:**

Lack of emotional support and openness about personal issues or problems were the main reasons for poor satisfaction with the quality of relationships. The patterns of inter-male interactivity are likely responsible for this, with half agreeing that they do not discuss their feelings with friends, and nearly a third (31%) wishing they could open up more to close friends.

There are also perceptual barriers to opening up – while men feel that their friends can rely on them for emotional support (70%), less than half (48%) agree they can rely on their friends. This means that although many men feel they can't rely on their friends, it is more likely that they can.

**Detail:**

Across the qualitative sample we also spoke to men who appeared to be quite well-connected socially – socialising at and after work, with mates at the pub or football, and in the pursuit of other interests – yet who did not see these relationships as satisfying. In essence, they were looking for a deeper connection, to be able to share their worries, feelings, problems and aspirations, but finding this impossible to do.

*“I have a lot of friends but few close ones”  
(Male, Unemployed, Shepparton)*

*“You can be really isolated even if you are surrounded by people who love you”  
(Male, Mid SES, Brisbane)*

For many men in the discussion groups who (by their own accounts) were quite isolated, having enough people to do things with was a bigger issue than finding relationships satisfying. Some revealed that they have never really managed to have many friends or to fit in socially. These men had lower expectations about what would constitute a healthy social life for them – having just one person to talk to, being comfortable in a group, and meeting regularly for some particular shared purpose would be enough and offer some sense of satisfaction.

While there does seem to be a small proportion of men (16%) who have low social support and are satisfied with this, those who are unsatisfied with the quality of relationships generally have fewer social interactions. Figure 26, for example, shows that those who were very/unsatisfied were more likely to have fewer people they were close to (44% had none), than those who were satisfied or very satisfied (45% had more than two people).

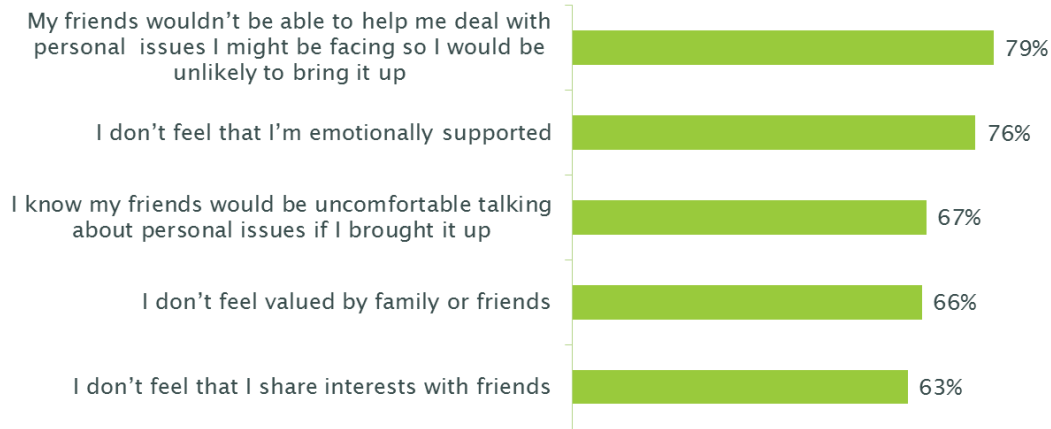
**Figure 26: Social interactions and satisfaction**

Number of people can rely on	Satisfaction with quality of relationships		
	Very/unsatisfied	Neutral	Very/satisfied
None	44%	33%	16%
1–2 people	44%	47%	39%
More than 2 people	12%	20%	45%
<b>Average number of social interactions a week</b>			
Times visit/see someone	1.4	1.7	2.4
Times talk to someone on the phone	4.4	4.7	6.9

When exploring the reasons given for being unsatisfied with quality of their friendships, they cite a lack of personal and emotional connection with friends or family, with friends being unable to help with personal issues (79%) and not feeling emotionally supported (76%). Many (67%) also feel their friends would be uncomfortable talking about their personal issues. Two-thirds (66%) do not feel valued and a similar proportion feel they don’t share interests with friends (63%). This again provides evidence

that many men may need help developing emotional fluency and the ability to connect on a more personal, more intimate level.

**Figure 27: Reasons unsatisfied with the quality of relationships**

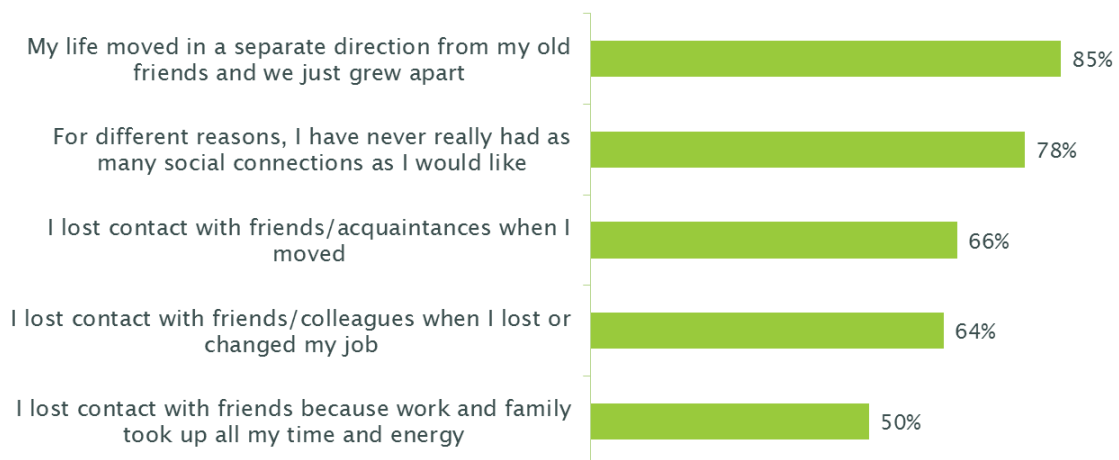


D15. Which of the following describe why you are not satisfied with the quality of relationships you have with friends/family? Base: Respondent who are not satisfied with the quality of relationships with friends/family, n=689

Most (85%) of those unsatisfied with the number of their social connections felt they grew apart from their old friends, moving away or changing jobs; but importantly, more than three-quarters (78%) felt they never really had as many connections as they wanted.

Half of all men in their middle years (50%) claimed to rarely talk about deeper personal issues with friends, while nearly a third (31%) don't spend much time talking with their friends in general. Almost a third of men (31%) wished that they could open up more to their friends and over a quarter (28%) want friends to open up to them in return.

**Figure 28: Reasons unsatisfied with the number of relationships**

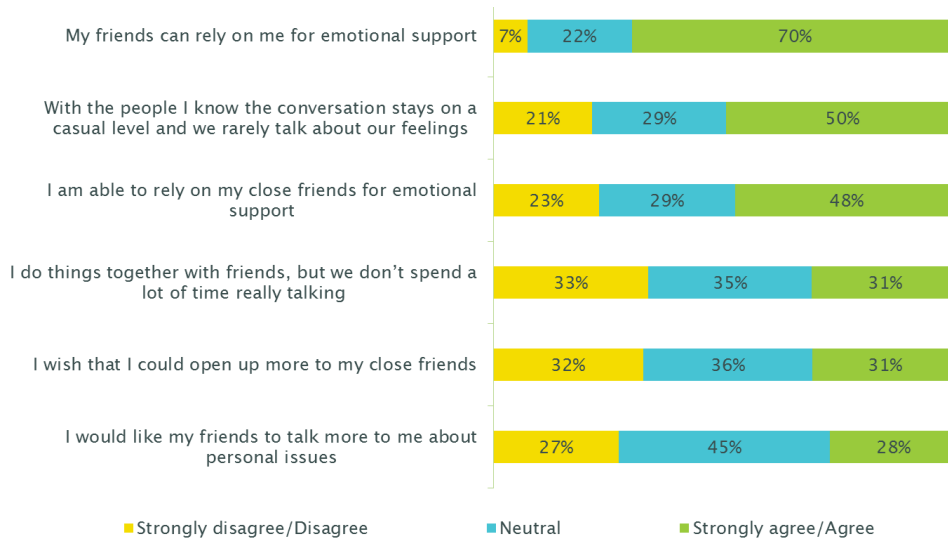


D14. Which of the following describe why you are not satisfied with the number of friends/acquaintances you have? Base: Respondent who are not satisfied with the number of friends/acquaintances, n=796



Importantly, while a majority of the population feel they are able to offer emotional support to their friends (70%), there was a sense that this support is not returned; less than half (48%) feel they are able to rely on their friends. This highlights a clear separation in expectations about emotional support – men feel they are able to provide emotional support, but don’t feel that other men are able to return this support. This may act as a barrier to men initiating these conversations with each other and potentially reinforcing social norms and lack of conversation around this issue.

Figure 29: Emotional connections

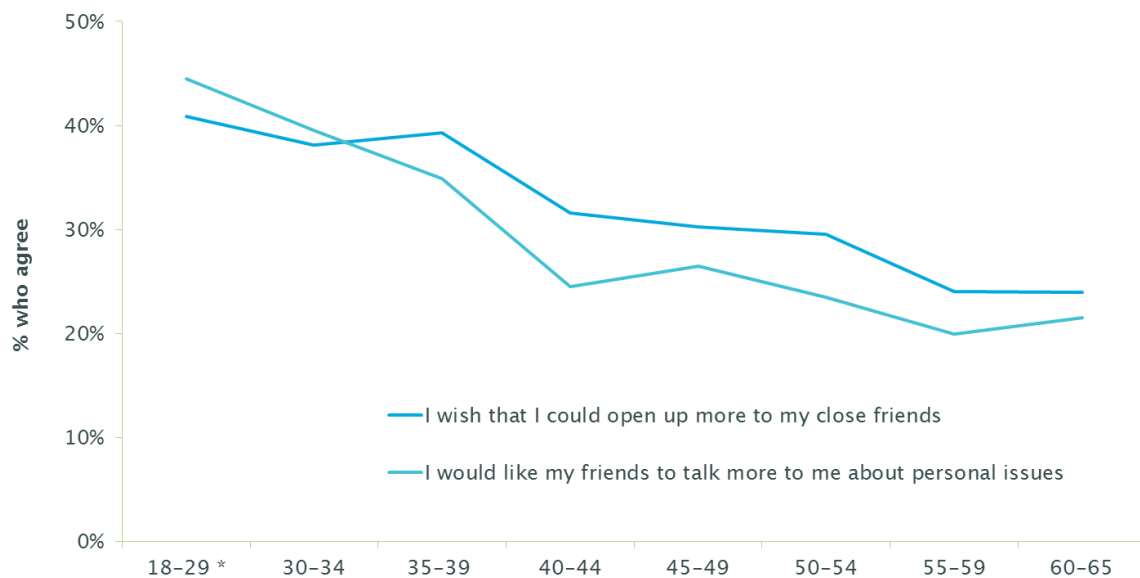


G3. Please read the following statements and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree:  
 Base: All respondents, n=3750

This was also highlighted in the discussion groups: men frequently mentioned that they felt like they would be bothering their friends to call them up, let alone to talk about things that may be troubling them. However, when asked whether they would mind if the friend called them, all welcomed the idea.

There is a clear generational association with the desire for more personal conversations: the 18-29 year old group is more likely to want to engage in more open, emotional conversations compared with those over 55. Figure 30 shows this 'hardening' over the middle years.

**Figure 30: Desire for more personal relationships, by age band**



G3 Please read the following statements and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree Base: All respondents, n=3750  
\*18-29 year olds unweighted n=300

### How do differences in background influence a desire for emotional openness?

Men from a CALD background were more likely to want to open up to their friends than men from a non-CALD background (44% wish they could open up more to close friends compared to 29% from non-CALD background) and to want their friends to talk more about personal issues (38% compared to 25%). This contrasts with the earlier finding that these men have stronger social ties and highlights that, for many of these men, improving the quality of their relationships, their ability to have meaningful conversations, and how this plays out within their own cultural norms has both positive (breadth) and negative (depth) influences on their ability to have satisfying relationships.

Men with ATSI backgrounds are more likely both to experience barriers to opening up emotionally amongst friends, and to want this to improve. Men with ATSI backgrounds were significantly more likely to feel inadequate if they asked someone for help for a personal problem (42% compared to 28%) and wouldn't know what to say to a mate who started talking to them about his problems or feelings (24% compared to 16%). They were more likely to feel they don't spend a lot of time talking with their close friends (40% compared to 31%). More wish they could open up more to their close

friends (40% compared to 31%). For those dissatisfied with the quality of their relationships this was more likely to be due to having a good social network but not talking about personal issues (63% compared to 37%) and not knowing what to say to a friend who spoke to them about personal issues (58% compared to 36%).

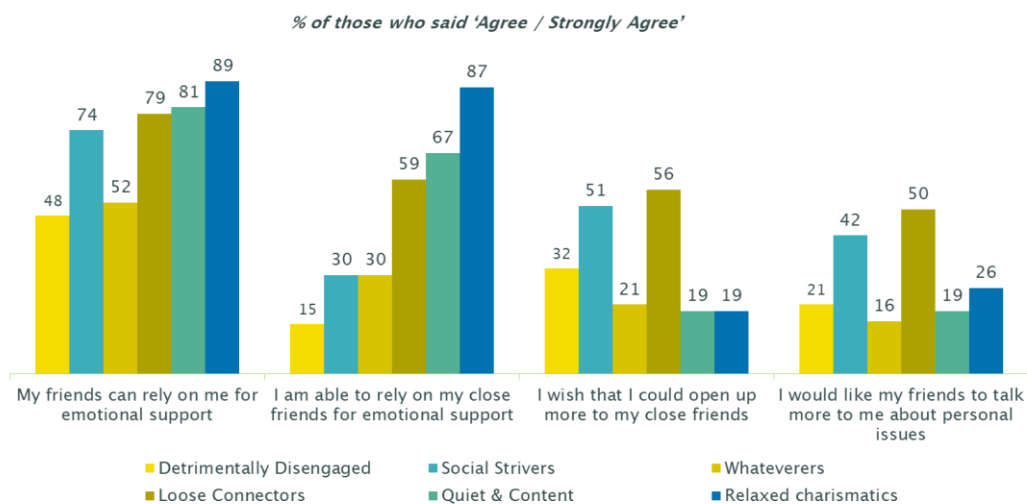
**How do the segments differ in terms of emotional support?**

As seen in Figure 31, there are also differences between segments. The Relaxed Charismatics agree that their friends can rely on them (89%), and they can rely on their friends (87%). The Quiet and Content agree that their friends can rely on them (81%), although only two-thirds (67%) believe they can rely on their friends for emotional support – however they are overall quite happy with the status quo, and less than one in five (19%) wish they could open up more, or their friends would open up more to them.

The Loose Connectors appear to crave the deeper, more emotional relationships – over half (56%) wish they could open up more to their friends, and half (50%) wish their friends would open up more to them.

Apart from the Quiet and Content and the Relaxed Charismatics (the segments with the highest levels of social support), there is an overall trend to be more likely to want to share emotionally with their friends than to have their friends open up to them, particularly for the two segments with the lowest levels of social support (the Detrimentially Disengaged and the Social Strivers).

**Figure 31: Desire for deeper emotional support by segment**



G3 Please read the following statements and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree Base: All respondents, n=3750

The segment differences between perceiving themselves as reliable friends and seeing themselves as unable to rely on friends are also telling. The largest 'perceptual gaps' are among the Social Strivers

and Detrimentially Disengaged groups, and their perception of not being able to rely on friends is likely to be a key barrier in their ability to form fulfilling and lasting relationships.

**Strategic Implications:**

Cultural background appears to influence what men expect from their friendships and this must be taken into account when designing programs or tools for different groups.

Certain segments of the population are likely to crave more emotionally satisfying relationships. Others just want someone they can rely on.

Men are more likely to be able to rely on their friends than they think they are – a key perceptual barrier needs to be challenged.

One of the biggest barriers to maintaining social connectedness may be merely picking up the phone and calling, or otherwise re-initiating contact.

## 4.2 Drivers of social connection and disconnection

Social connection is a complex issue and there are a range of factors including underlying predispositions as well as situational triggers that explain the phenomenon of men experiencing poor social connections in their middle years. This section of the report covers the drivers and triggers uncovered in the qualitative and quantitative research, including the socialisation of men, formations of friendships, life events, and the apparent importance of the workplace.

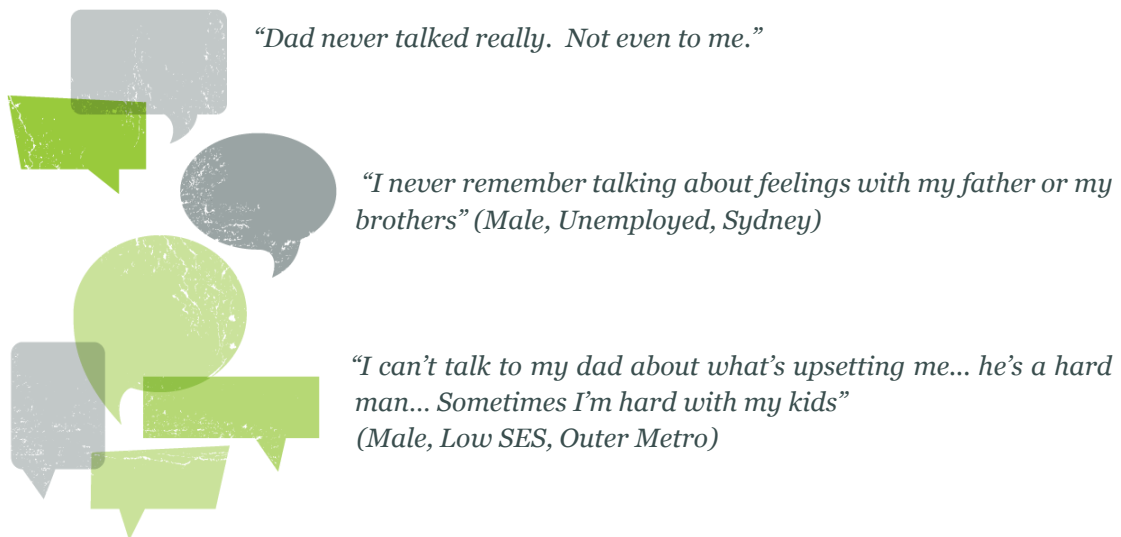
### 4.2.1 Does men's socialisation and conformity to male stereotypes and cultural norms impact on their experience of social connections?

#### Summary:

Men who had experienced low levels of emotional openness or engagement with their fathers growing up are more likely to currently experience poor social support. An adherence to some of the dominant notions of masculinity appear to be related to social support.

#### Detail:

People across the qualitative groups talked about parental influence on men's capacity to make and keep friends and social contacts over their lifetime. Men revealed stories about their parents, and especially their fathers, that suggested that they too had been lonely and isolated. Men looked back on a lack of connection between themselves and their fathers and considered this to be one of the root causes of the unhappiness they had experienced in their social relationships.



The quantitative survey also highlighted these findings; a majority of men (59%) agreed that growing up, their father didn't share his emotions easily. Only around half (49%) agreed that their father always listened to them when they had something important to say. Gay/bisexual men were more likely (66%) to agree their father didn't share their emotions easily, and less likely to agree (40%) that their father was always ready to listen when they had something important to say.

The relationship between men’s social connectedness and their relationship with their father is captured in Figure 32 below. Those who had low social support were more likely to agree that growing up, their father didn’t share his emotions (mean agreement of 3.8 compared to agreement of 3.2 of those with high social support). Those with lower social support were less likely to agree that their father listened to them when they had something important to say (mean of 2.9 compared to mean agreement of 3.6 for those with high social support).

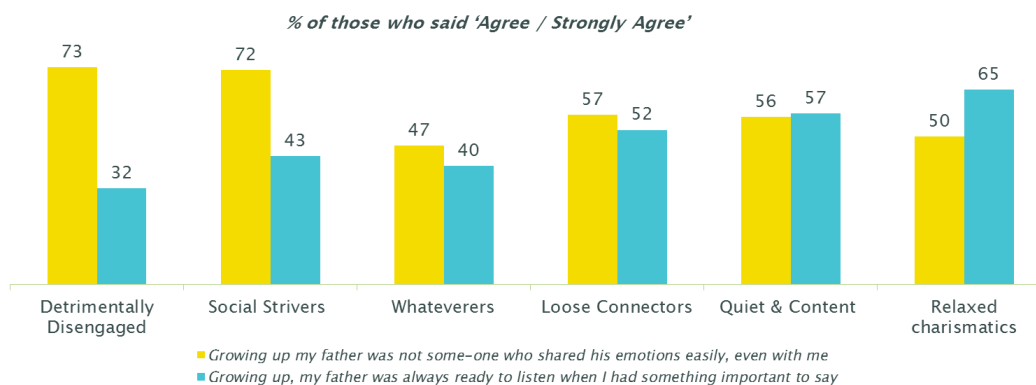
Figure 32: Influence of father figure by social support

Level of agreement with statement (mean score out of 5)	DSSI		
	Low	Medium	High
I had little/no father figure in my life growing up	2.8	2.3	2.0
Growing up my father was not some-one who shared his emotions easily, even with me	3.8	3.5	3.2
Growing up, my father was always ready to listen when I had something important to say	2.9	3.3	3.6

These results support the notion that good communication between father and son may be a protective factor from social disconnectedness in later life.

The two segments with poorer social support, the Detrimentially Disengaged and Social Strivers, were more likely to agree that their father did not share emotions easily (73% and 72% respectively), and the Detrimentially Disengaged were also less likely to agree (32%) that their father listened to them when they had something important to say.

Figure 33: Influence of father figure by segment



G1 Please read the following statements and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree. Base: All respondents, n=3750

Men also talked a great deal in our discussion groups about male stereotypes, cultural expectations, and norms that promote a narrow and restrictive notion of manhood as underlying some of the problems they are now experiencing. They say the expectation that men are silent, resilient, unemotional and self-reliant makes it harder for them to engage with others, and especially with other men, in any but a very superficial way. This emerged as a key theme across the groups.

*“As a boy you learn not to show emotion. Grandpa passed away and I didn’t show anything when I was a kid. That was in private. Strong, silent type. It’s programmed into you. Not to be a wimp”*  
 (Male, Unemployed, Sydney)

*“Masculinity is a complete façade... anything slips and they lose their sense of self”* (Female, Melbourne)

*“It could be an Australian thing, you are taught to toughen up, be blokey, not show any weakness or divulge how you feel. You have to be Crocodile Dundee. Those stereotypes stop people from being real, from opening up.”* (Male, Brisbane)



Those with low social support tend to feel more judged by society when opening up, and are less likely to disagree that ‘a guy will lose respect if he talks about his problems’. This supports the hypothesis that this aspect of the dominant frame of masculinity could pose a barrier to men building quality relationships. However, another aspect – ‘admiring a guy who is totally sure of himself’ – shows a much weaker, potentially non-existent relationship with social support, demonstrating that the relationship between masculinity and social connectedness is more complex.

**Figure 34: Perceptions of respect and masculinity by level of social support**

Level of agreement with statement (mean score out of 5)	DSSI		
	Low	Medium	High
I admire a guy who is totally sure of himself	3.3	3.4	3.5
A guy will lose respect if he talks about his problems	2.6	2.3	2.0

Exploring these perceptions of respect and masculinity by segment reveals that the Loose Connector segment is significantly more likely to agree with these statements, and appears to be more disposed to these notions of masculinity. This segment has the strongest inhibitions about opening up and expressing emotion.

Figure 35: Perceptions of respect and masculinity by segments

Level of agreement with statement (mean score out of 5)	Segments					
	Detrimentially Disengaged	Social Strivers	Whateverers	Loose Connectors	Quiet & Content	Relaxed charismatics
It is essential for a guy to get respect from others	3.3	3.5	3.3	3.7	3.3	3.5
A man always deserves the respect of his family	3.3	3.4	3.4	3.7	3.2	3.4
I admire a guy who is totally sure of himself	3.3	3.6	3.3	3.6	3.3	3.6
A guy will lose respect if he talks about his problems	2.5	2.3	2.5	2.7	2.0	1.9

**Strategic Implication:**

A perception that they will lose respect if and when they talk about their problems is a potential barrier for those in the most disconnected segments. A re-framing or positioning of help-seeking behaviours to be a more masculine trait – the sign of a strong man, not a weak or needy man – would help lower these barriers.

**4.2.2 Are high levels of self-stigma and low levels of help-seeking behaviour associated with lower social support?**

**Summary:**

Over half of men (55%) agreed that they would feel worse about themselves if they could not solve their own problems and the majority (70%) agreed that problems are part of life, and something that they have to deal with. These attitudes around self-stigma and help-seeking may be inhibiting men from reaching out when they are experiencing poor social isolation, potentially increasing their risk of further social isolation and associated mental health issues.

**Detail:**

Over half of men (55%) agreed that they would feel worse about themselves if they could not solve their own problems, and over a quarter (28%) indicated they would feel inadequate if they asked someone for help with a problem. There were no significant differences by age or CALD background. There were differences by ATSI background, with 42% of those from ATSI backgrounds agreeing they would feel inadequate if they asked someone for help with a personal problem.

Higher levels of self-stigma were associated with low levels of social support, captured in the table below.



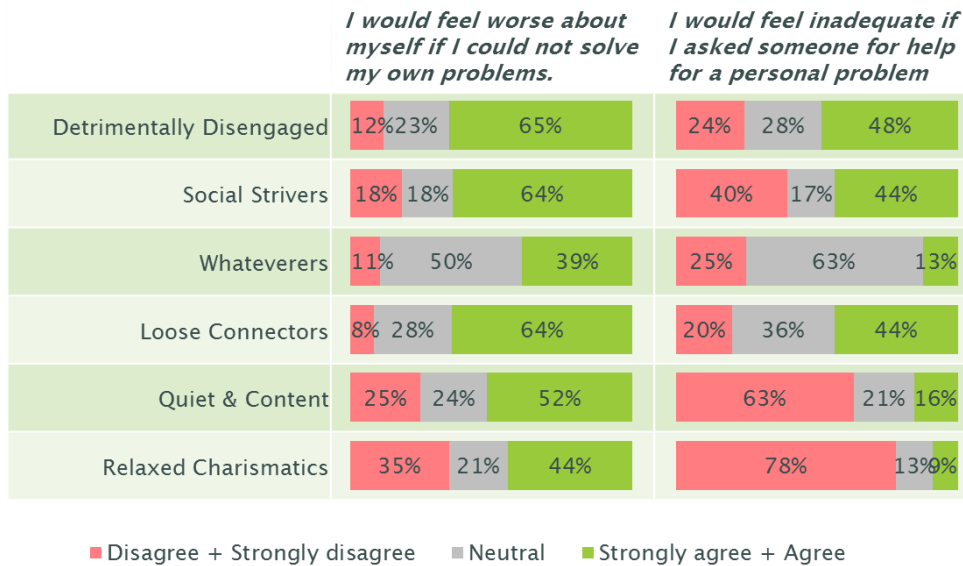
Figure 36: Self-stigma by social support

Level of agreement with statement (mean score out of 5)	DSSI		
	Low	Medium	High
I'd feel inadequate if I asked someone for help for a personal problem.	3.3	2.9	2.4
I'd feel worse about myself if I could not solve my own problems.	3.6	3.4	3.3

This self-stigma seems to be a particular problem for the Detrimentially Disengaged (65%), Loose Connectors and Social Strivers (both 64%) – any notion of needing or asking for help may be a strong deterrent for these groups.

The Whateverers segment had relatively low levels of agreement with these self-stigma measures, suggesting they may have lower barriers to help-seeking should the need arise.

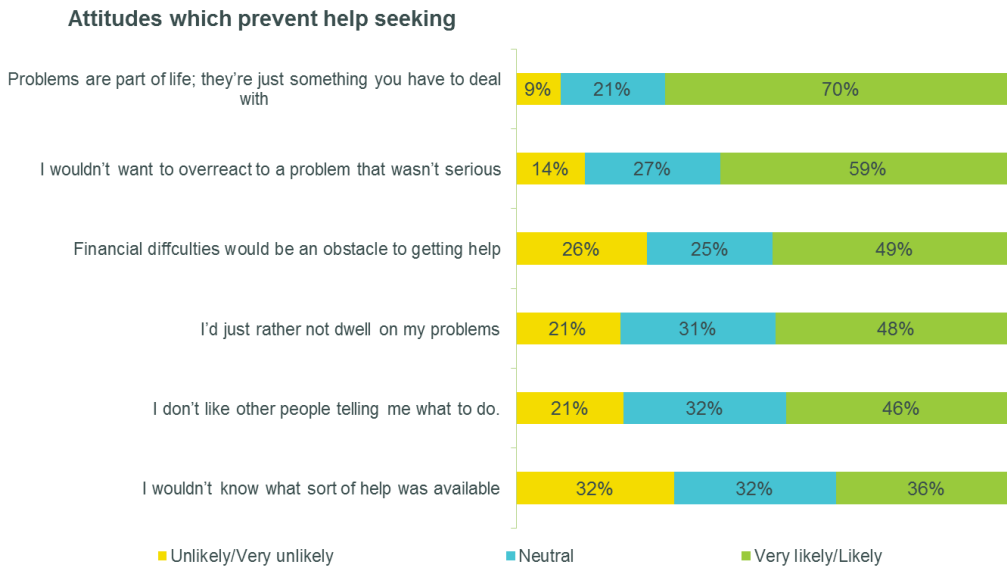
Figure 37: Self-stigma by level of segment



H4 To what extent do you agree or disagree with I would...  
 Base: All respondents, n=3750

One of the main reasons which may stop men asking for help (70%) is that problems are seen as a part of life, and something that people have to deal with. This does not appear to be age-related, or related to CALD or ATSI background. The Whateverers were significantly less likely than all other segments to agree that problems are part of life (56%). The Whateverers segment may be more open to seeking help with connecting to others – more direct messages encouraging men to seek help, and how to maintain or build friendships, may be compelling for this group.

Figure 38: Help-seeking behaviours



H5. Imagine that you had a particular problem you weren't sure what to do about. Below are several reasons why you might choose NOT to seek help. Please read each reason and decide how likely each would be in keeping you from seeking help.  
 Base: All respondents, n=3750

These maxims and precepts of hegemonic masculinity are double-edged: some help to breed resilience, while others – all highly correlated – prevent men from admitting their problems and taking steps towards improving their situation. Some aspects of the normal socialisation of men can therefore be detrimental to their ability to maintain and form new friendships in later life.

*“I personally think, and I don't want to be sexist, that males want to feel strong. I think, well I know, if I was to pick up the phone after such a long time or a fallout that I would be "lowering my barrier" so to speak and seem weak.” (Male, Vulnerable board participant)*

**Strategic Implications:**  
 At least some of the aspects of dominant masculinity appear to impede the development of quality relationships. These aspects – self-reliance, fear of showing emotion, fear of judgement – must be effectively re-framed for men to a more open and frank model.  
 Challenging men to be more open with their children through recognising the importance of father relationships in their lives will be important to re-framing the issue in the long term.

### 4.2.3 How do life events impact on men's social support and connectedness?

#### Summary:

Many men note the general pressures of family and work on their levels of social connectedness, but financial problems and family conflicts were the most common specific events that impacted on social connections (47% and 45% of men have experienced each of these respectively). Among men in our groups who had experienced periods of isolation, certain life events, particularly divorce, addiction and financial problems, had substantial negative impacts on men's social connections.

#### Detail:

In our discussion groups, men talk about the strains put on friendships as part of the 'normal progression' of a romantic relationship into family life. As young men move into their 30s, begin starting families and become increasingly focused on their work, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to find the time and energy to socialise. A group of friends will rarely move through these life stages at the same time or at the same pace, and they report a gradual decline in relationships as a consequence.

*"In my circle everyone else has married, had families, and just don't have the time. Now I feel like they have to get permission from their partner. That's where it started. [They say:] 'I can't really do that; I'm doing something with my kids.' I'm feeling like slowly but surely they are less and less in my life" (Male, Lower SES, Brisbane)*

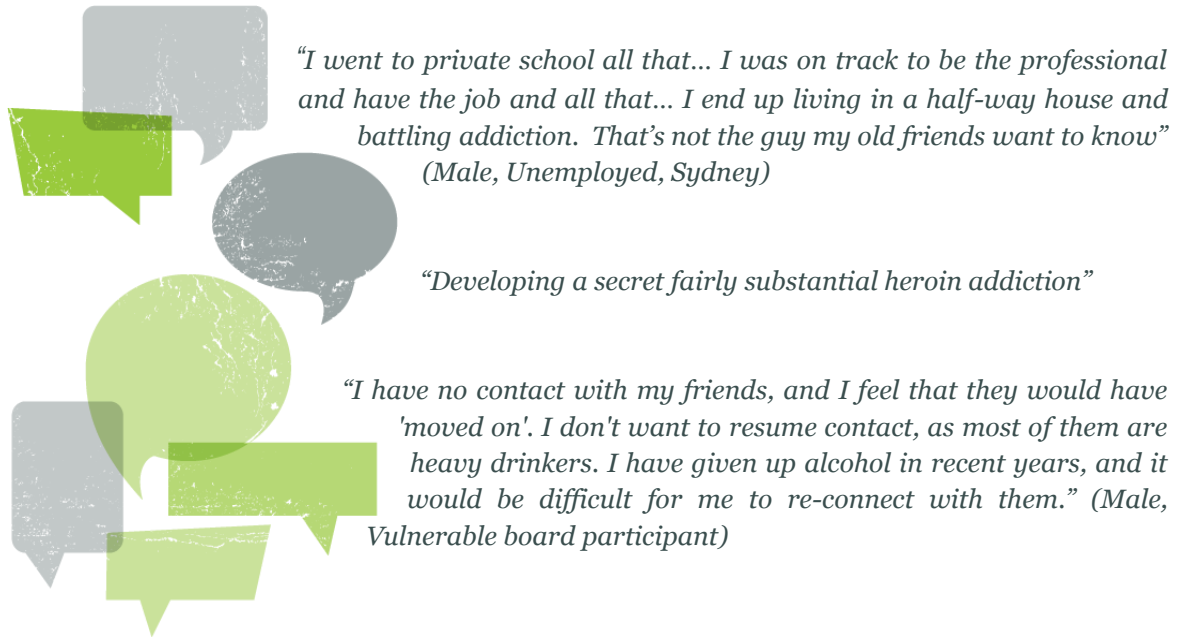
*"It was a real kick in the balls... I never remember crying as an adult and then I couldn't stop. A lot of your mates are married to your wife's mates. It's a bit of a crisis to find out who your mates really are... No one" (Male, Experienced Divorce, Regional Vic)*

*"When we have kids we seem to be around the wife's friends, rather than keeping our own. You end up neglecting your own friends"*

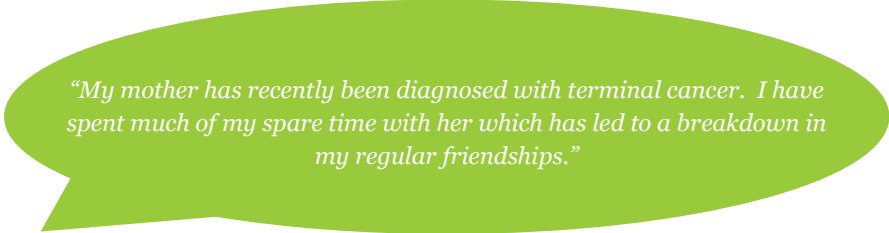
Men in the groups who had experienced divorce were bitter and upset, but added to all the other hurt they reported that friends had turned away because they were more deeply committed to their partner than to them.

There was widespread acceptance that a couple's apparently shared social network turns out to belong to the wife in a separation, leaving men devastated and alone.

Men who had faced addictions and mental health problems or lost their jobs in their 20s, 30s and 40s, and felt they had failed to become the person they were meant to, reported leaving their old friends behind because they 'didn't want them to see me like this'. Overcoming addiction can also lead to new challenges with forming and maintaining social connections.



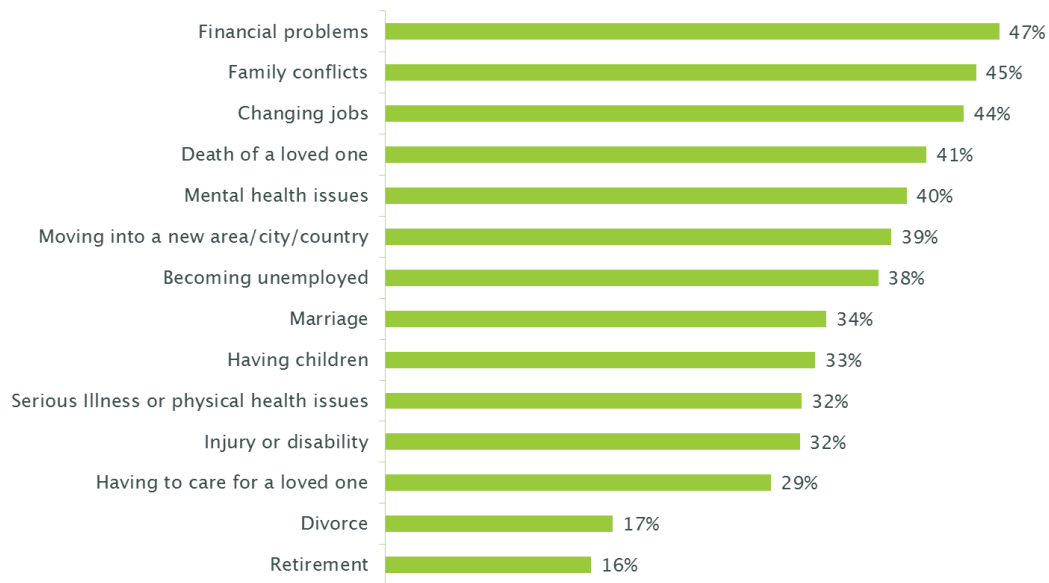
Becoming a carer also poses challenges to maintaining friendships.



In the survey, the events that had the biggest impact on social support were financial problems (47%), family conflicts (45%) and changing jobs (44%). Divorce (17%) and retirement (16%) had the least impact.

Other events, such as getting married or having children, were not associated with either strong or poor levels of social support, and these events may have little impact, or both a positive and negative impact, on social support. For example, having children may have allowed men to socialise with other new fathers, but decreased the amount of time they could spend with old friends.

Figure 39: Life events impacting on satisfaction



E1. Have any of the following had a big impact on your satisfaction with the number and quality of family, friends and acquaintances in the last ten years?  
 Base: All respondents, n=3750

Moving to a new area/city/country was an oft-mentioned event by the men on our vulnerable bulletin boards which impacted on social connections. Many noted that moving location has been a contributing factor to their isolation, whether it’s themselves or friends/family that has moved away

“I am a non-English speaker and come from other country. I find myself now quite isolated to others. Maybe that is because I have few friends here. Even if I want to share my story, I don't know who to speak to.”  
 (Male, CALD, Melbourne)

On our trans\* boards, the emotional and medical process of transitioning from female to male was considered to be an extremely challenging time for those going through the process. Several of the participants on our trans\* male discussion board discussed the negative effects transitioning had on their socialisation during and after transition.



*“For me transitioning has had an effect on my socialization. I avoid places I used to visit because when I go and people don't talk to me anymore it is just too painful... I have been told not to come to Christmas by my sister and cannot see her boys, my nephews, because she says they are too vulnerable as they are teenagers. There are some people who have stayed friends with me through my transition and they are very special... I think transition can have a very big impact on how much isolation one can have to deal with.” (Trans\* participant)*

*“I am a transgender person and when I took medication and had surgery to align my body to be more masculine, a lot of my female friends in the lesbian scene didn't know how to continue their friendship with me. This was a great loss.” (Online survey participant)*

For intersex individuals the medical intervention or “normalising” treatments discussed typically occurred when the person was an infant, and the emotional processing of this occurs later in life. Finding out that you were born intersex was universally considered by those on our board as a confusing, traumatic time, and often one that is kept private.

*“My partner wanted a “real man”, and my diagnosis had a big impact on that perception. Initially I went onto testosterone because my hormone levels were really low, then I had what became a series of surgeries, mostly “normalizing” surgeries. I suffered depression for a few years as a result.” (Intersex participant)*

**Strategic Implication:**  
Most men will undoubtedly go through many life events that may impact on their social connectedness and yet they are unlikely to seek help; encouraging men to offer help and support to their friends going through difficulties may be an effective way of improving general connectedness.

#### 4.2.4 Does employment status affect social connectedness?

##### Summary:

The workplace is the most common way in which friendships are formed, and men who are unemployed or on a disability pension seem to be particularly at risk of social disconnection – they have lower levels of social support and are less likely to be satisfied with their social connection. Those who were retired appear to show similar patterns to those working in full time employment, perhaps because this is their choice and many men around them are also entering this life stage.

##### Detail:

In the discussion groups, workforce participation appeared to be very important to these men: providing enough social connection to those with the right kind of work, but exacerbating the isolation of those with a low connection to the workforce – spasmodic, casual work or work where they are very much alone (for instance, a farm hand or truck driver).

Some men in the groups and on the bulletin boards also felt that they had much more social activity and connectivity at work, and since losing their jobs have grown further and further away from friends and family. This is not helped by their lack of confidence as the feeling of judgement seems to suppress the urge to contact friends: losing employment or lack of accomplishments hinders the willingness to talk about their past, creating a sense of embarrassment.

*“I’ve missed social engagement [from a change in work circumstances]... All those social engagements tend to dry up when aspects of your life change, and usually it’s fundamentally around employment.” (Male, Unemployed)*

*“I work evenings and nights so do not have many social connections”*

*“Mainly due to watching what little money I have, but also I hate being patronised, and feeling like I’m a lesser person for not having work. Most of my friends are tolerant of my situation but the reality is nobody really understands it, no matter what they say or how hard they try; they’re not in my position so how can they?” (Male, Unemployed, Regional)*

*“You become inner focused [when you lose your job], and you lose your skills [interacting with others] if you aren’t practising at work” (Male, Unemployed, Sydney)*

*“I was made redundant after 25 years... most of my friends were gone along with my job. I never seem to make any other friends with other jobs I have worked at since” (Male, Regional).*

*“When you lose your job, you lose mates and confidence. Your self-esteem is shot... you are mourning the loss and can’t talk” (Male, Unemployed, Regional)*

## Ethnographic case study:

**Social Striver**

*Len is 63, married, and has not been in employment for more than 12 years. Initially, Len seems pretty satisfied with his social life; however it is quickly clear that life events have made it hard to maintain friendships. His redundancy cut him off from colleagues, who tend to have their own busy lives outside of work. Although he does bump into them from time to time, he hasn't been able to keep in touch in a meaningful way. A cancer diagnosis a few years ago also kept him away from existing friends, as he felt people were uncomfortable with illness and weren't sure how to treat him after he announced his diagnosis. When asked about the people he would want to discuss an emotional issue with, Len struggles to think of anyone beyond his wife. Len only recently joined a newly created Men's Shed in his area, which he came across by accident, which thus far has*

Those who were retired or working full time were significantly more likely to be satisfied with the quality of relationships (71% and 67% respectively) than those who are unemployed (46%) or on disability benefits (40%).

Those working full time, or who were retired, had significantly higher social support (DSSI scores 24.3 and 24.5 respectively) than the unemployed. Those who were unemployed for more than two years, and still looking for work, had the lowest levels of social support (20.3), with similar levels of social support seen for those on a disability pension (20.6). Those unemployed for less than two years and still looking for work (23.2) and unemployed not looking for work (21.2) also had significantly lower levels of support than the full time workers or retired men.

**Strategic Implication:**

Understanding that unemployment may be a particular trigger for social disconnection will help to target men who may be at risk.



#### 4.2.5 How does resilience interact with satisfaction and connectedness?

The statistical model presented earlier clearly shows that resilience is a key protective factor against psychological distress, and also drives satisfaction with relationships. It is positively correlated with social support and negatively with social drift, indicating that those with greater resilience are less likely to lose friends and acquaintances and more likely to have emotionally supportive relationships.

Resilience is a measure of how quickly one can bounce back or recover from stressful situations and events. The overall mean for the brief resilience score contained within the survey was 3.2. The 60-65 year olds had slightly higher levels of resilience (3.3), with no differences among other age groups. Men from ATSI backgrounds had lower levels of resilience (mean 2.9 compared to 3.2), but there were no differences by CALD background. Men working full time had higher levels of resilience (3.3) compared to all other employment status – including retired (3.1), unemployed not looking for work (2.7) and disability pension (2.6). Men living with a partner, regardless of whether or not they had children, had higher levels of resilience (3.3), particularly compared to those living on their own or with parents or family (2.9). Levels of resilience were highest in the Relaxed Charismatics (3.7) and Quiet and Content (3.4), and lowest in the Detrimentially Disengaged (2.7).

Figure 40: Resilience scores by segment

	Segments					
	Detrimentially Disengaged	Social Strivers	Whateverers	Loose Connectors	Quiet & Content	Relaxed charismatics
Brief resilience score	2.7	2.9	3.1	3.0	3.4	3.7

Helping men to build resilience would seem to have multiple benefits – reducing psychological distress, and increasing levels of satisfaction.

However, as noted previously, there are some aspects of resilience that are strongly entwined with the potentially harmful but dominant frames of masculinity, so any activity designed to build resilience must also take this into account. In practice this means that when building resilience among the less socially connected, there may be a need to help them adjust their definitions of what it is to be a ‘real man’, and incorporate greater emotional openness into the way they deal with stressful events.

## 4.3 Practical barriers

### Summary:

Alongside behavioural and attitudinal barriers to social connectedness, there are also practical barriers. Nearly half of men agree financial restraints may prevent them from socialising, and health problems can also be an inhibitor – not only when considering the impacts of injury on connections to sporting teams as discussed above, but also for simple day to day interactions.

*“The money dries up you can’t go out”  
(Male, Unemployed, Regional Vic)*

*[Frustrated] “People don’t understand you can’t afford the \$2 for a coffee”  
(Male, Unemployed, Regional Vic)*

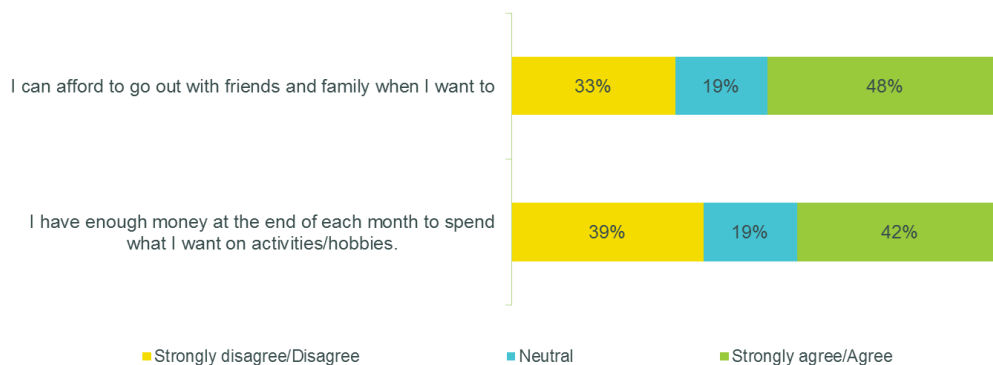
### 4.3.1 How do financial restraints impact on experiences of social connection?

Financial problems were the most commonly mentioned life event that impacted on social connection, as discussed above, and for nearly half of men (49%) financial difficulties were likely or very likely to keep them from seeking help about a problem.

A third (33%) of men indicated that they cannot afford to go out with friends and family when they want to and more (39%) do not have enough money at the end of each month to spend on activities and hobbies.

Over half of the Detrimentially Disengaged and Social Strivers segments (56% and 53%) said that they cannot afford to go out with family and friends when they want to, suggesting financial barriers may be exacerbating poor social connections for these segments.


Figure 41: Financial situation



H1/H3. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements  
Base: All respondents, n=3750

### 4.3.2 Does men's health impact on their social connectedness?

Qualitatively, men in the groups spoke about how their health had impacted on their social connections, often through sports injuries and the resulting impact on connections through sporting teams.



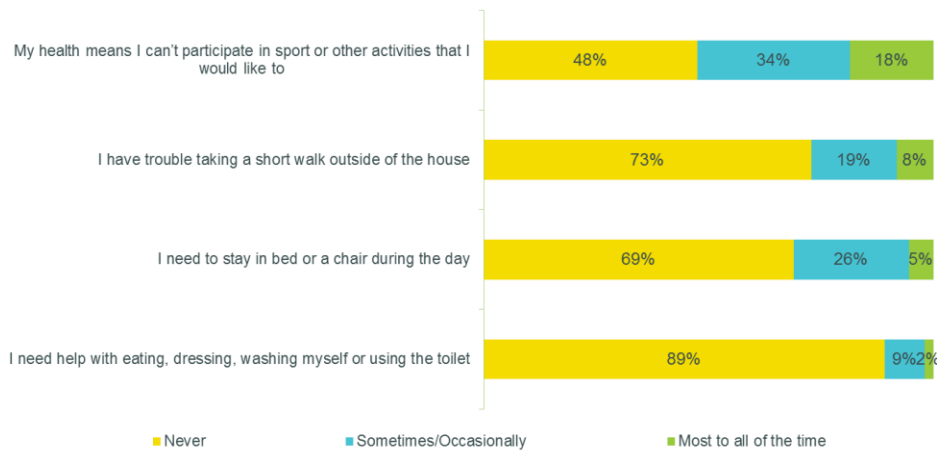
*“Injuries, operations, can't get out and play sport, if you're not playing sports you haven't got that interaction” (Male, Low SES, Outer Urban)*

*“And because of the obesity, he gets the depression, and now his knees are gone, and it's becoming a vicious circle, and he can't get himself out, so then he starts picking and arguing with you when you're trying to help him. [I say] you're the only one who can do it, you have the support, so many people want to help you, but he shuts them out, because he doesn't want to face things.” (Female,, Melbourne)*

*“After being made redundant I searched for a new job, after sending a total of 347 emails and getting replies from only two (and that was to say sorry no thanks) I had two heart attacks. At this time I have 3 stents in my arteries keeping me alive. My friends have not contacted me since my first heart attack. I guess I just closed up and went inside myself as I decided that I am the only person I can trust” (Male, Older, Sydney)*

Nearly one in five men (18%) noted that their health means that most of the time they can't participate in sport or other activities that they would like to, and just under one in ten (8%) have trouble taking a short walk outside of the house most of the time. Men with low social support were more likely than others to indicate they couldn't participate in sports or other activities because of their health (28% low range, compared to 16% medium, 15% high range).

Figure 42: Physical Health situation



H7. How often does each of the following apply to you?  
 Base: All respondents, n=3750

**Strategic Implications:**  
 Any programs or interventions need to be built around some of the particular financial restraints and health barriers faced by many of these men.

Encouraging sporting clubs to maintain contact with, and a role for, injured members will help keep many men connected.

### 4.3.3 Practical barriers for trans\* men

For the trans\* community, the practical barriers to social connections were largely similar to the wider population: that is, financial issues, the stress of work, relationships, and losing touch with friends who are going down different pathways.

*“I would like to socialise more often. I think work, my relationship and finances have all contributed to me staying home more or going out less.”*  
 (Trans\* participant)

*“I find myself searching for avenues to socialise...I do feel that my age counts against me. A lot of the things I see that might interest me attract a young crowd (well, under 35). I assume it's a relationship thing - I spent 28-43 in a long-term relationship - but most of my current friends want to socialise as couples, so I guess most people are like that. Being single at my age seems rare.”*  
 (Trans\* participant)

#### 4.3.4 Practical barriers for intersex people

Likewise, the intersex individuals we spoke with discussed similar practical barriers to the wider community, including moving cities, financial troubles, and long work hours.

There does seem to be a reliance on online resources to find likeminded people, and a preference for online dating sites when seeking a partner. This allowed individuals to raise their intersex status with a potential partner in a safe space and to screen out anyone who would not be accepting of their intersex status.

*“Also, migrating has a bit impact on social isolation. It took me a few years to really feel comfortable socially after moving to Australia.” (Intersex participant)*

*“I've found Meetup.com to be a great resource in finding social groups to go to that fit your interests or are nearby. I joined OKCupid a while back just to see what happens... I did meet a girl and her transgendered partner whom I've become friends with, and from there hopefully I'll meet further people who are in their social circles as this year progresses... The last two years in my transition from my 20s to the 30s, where I've lost a relationship and some close friendships for various reasons, kept me in life limbo for two years where I wouldn't go out and about except when I had to, and therefore caused me to fall into some sort of social depression, but I seem to be slowly getting out of that rut, and those activities above seem to be contributing to that.” (Intersex participant)*



## 4.4 What is the role of the internet and social media in connectedness?

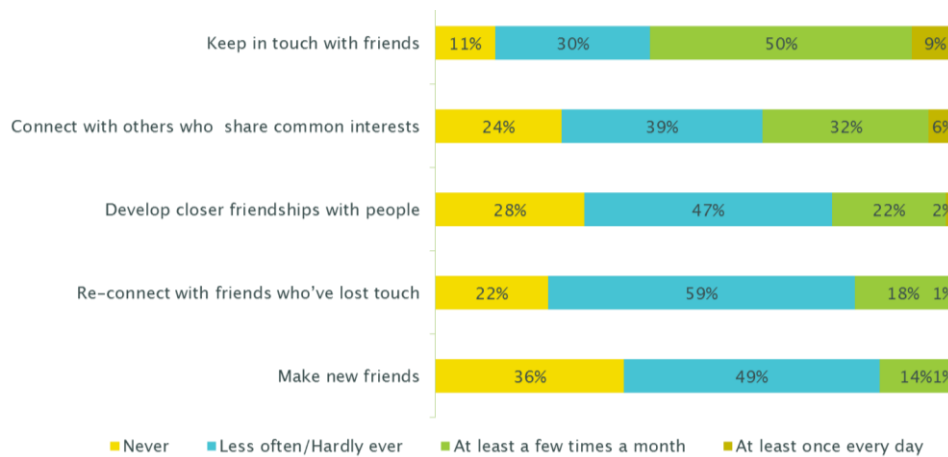
### Summary:

In general, men are using the internet to maintain and develop friendships, rather than build new ones. Overall, men are less satisfied with the online interactions than with social connections more generally; however many saw the internet having a role for men who are otherwise lonely or even isolated to participate in a non-threatening environment.

### Detail:

Keeping in touch with friends was the most common form of online socialising amongst men aged 30 to 65, with six in ten (59%) claiming to do so at least a few times a month. In general, men are using the internet to maintain friendships, rather than build new ones.

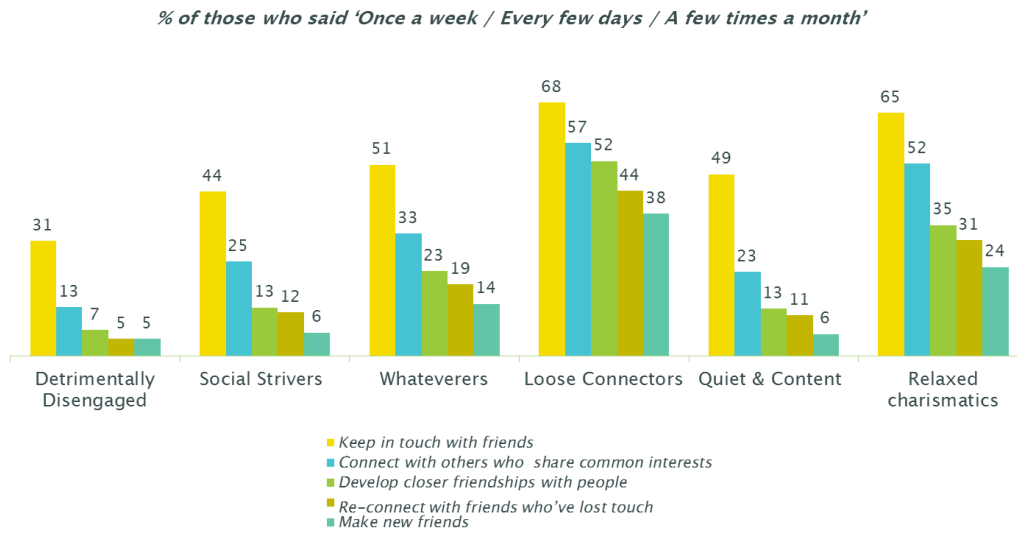
Figure 43: Frequency of connecting online



G4. Thinking about connecting with people online, how often do you use the internet to connect with people in the following ways?

Only just over a third (37%) of men agree that they get what they want from the interactions and relationships they have online. As seen in Figure 45, the patterns of satisfaction by segment with online follow the patterns of satisfaction more generally, although overall levels of satisfaction are much lower.

Figure 44: Online interactions by segment

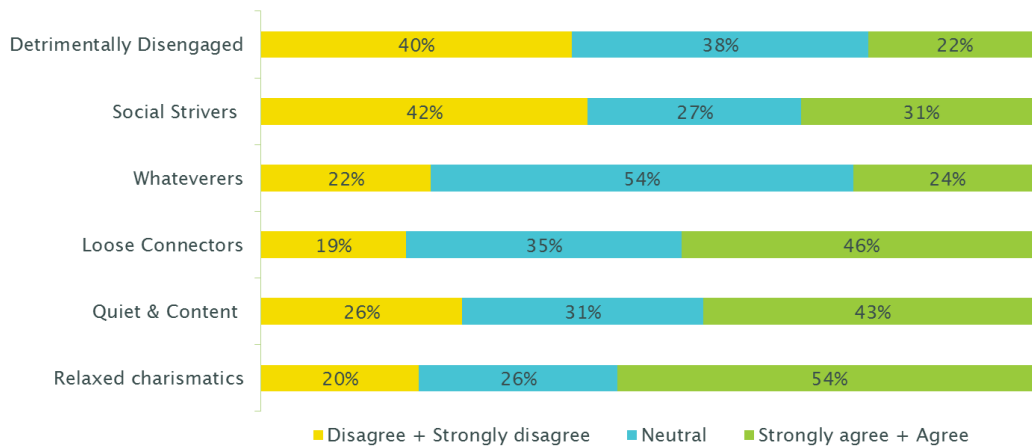


G4 Thinking about connecting with people online, how often do you use the internet to connect with people in the following ways  
Base: All respondents, n=3750

Importantly, however, the Detrimentially Disengaged and Social Strivers are much less satisfied with their engagement online, and may therefore be unlikely to respond to conventional online interventions. Innovative, targeted tools and programs that are designed specifically for the needs of these segments may resonate more strongly.

Conversely, the Loose Connectors regularly use online communications to make new friends, develop closer friendships with people and connect with others over common interests – in this respect they are even more engaged online than the Relaxed Charismatics. Online tools are likely to be effective for Loose Connectors – they need help deepening their relationships and perhaps increasingly with both offering and accepting emotional support through online relationships.

Figure 45: Satisfaction with online interactions by segment



G5 To what extent do you agree or disagree with Overall I get what I want from the interactions and relationships I have online?  
Base: All respondents, n=3750

Across the discussion groups men and women spoke of the benefits of social media in affording men who are otherwise lonely or even isolated to participate in a relatively easy and non-threatening environment. It had helped a whole range of men (those who have moved interstate and internationally in particular) who have social networks to maintain these connections, and to keep in contact without having to rely on the phone, which is not a preferred channel for many of these men.

Those who are more isolated used the internet, including social media, to build connections without having to meet anyone face to face. For those who are feeling insecure, awkward and withdrawn, social media was a way to reach out and connect, assured of anonymity, and as such the internet can be both cathartic and an important way to encourage participation – albeit online. Several of the more deeply isolated men we spoke to had joined forums with other men going through similar periods of social connectedness, and had found this a relief, and in some instances, the impetus to do something (often seeking counselling and men's groups) to alleviate their sense of isolation.

The internet was also a way for men to find and investigate options that might encourage them to participate in activities and to find possible solutions to their sense of social connectedness. For some, initial experiences reaching out online led gradually to a range of face to face participation opportunities and helped them overcome a lot of their problems.

*“We can't pretend that Facebook or any of social media is a substitute for face to face talking and being with other people”  
(Male, Unemployed)*

However, in all these conversations, men and women also highlighted the downside of social media for men who are not feeling good about themselves and are at risk of isolation. They talked about the risk of withdrawing from, and in fact losing ability to deal with, face to face interactions as they

grow to rely more and more on the digital world for their connections. This was felt to put a lot of men at greater risk, especially those who are younger (in their 30s) and have fewer barriers to conducting most of their interactions online. People also talked about the insidious risk of men who aren't feeling good about themselves reading about classmates, colleagues and mates painting a (probably highly doctored) picture of a perfect life – leaving these socially unhappy men feeling even worse about themselves and more inclined to withdraw.

#### **Strategic Implications:**

The overwhelming conclusion was that social media has a key role to play in encouraging men to reach out, and to provide them with a pathway back to face to face interactions with others.

The internet more generally offers men a perhaps confusing myriad of options – highlighting some choices and helping men filter to groups based on their interests or purpose may help some men seeking connection find an appropriate vehicle.



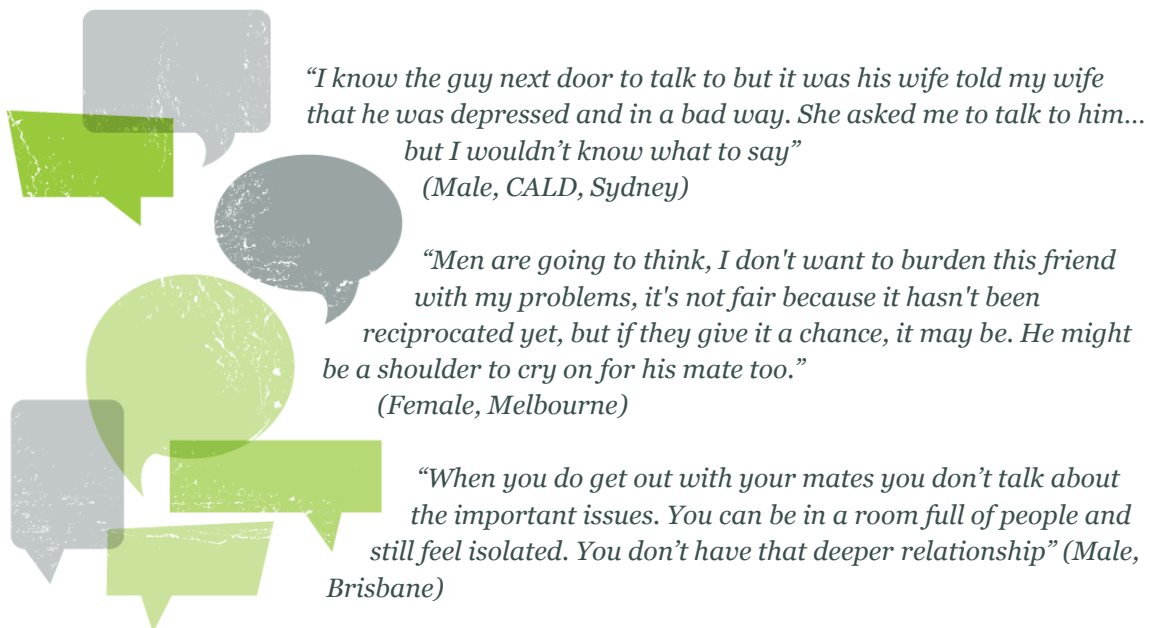


## 5. Interventions

### 5.1 What is the role of the internet and social media in connectedness?

#### 5.1.1 What social skills might facilitate connectedness?

In the discussion groups, men clearly articulated wanting to open up emotionally and connect with friends. Men spoke very openly about struggling to initiate deeper conversations, and about how they might step in to reply to a friend in the event that he started a conversation about his feelings, problems or needs. These men wanted to be there for their friends, but admitted they may not know what to do.



Here, there seems to be a complex interplay between some of the psychological notions of resilience, some of the demonstrable precepts of masculinity – and hence the dominant male sense of identity – and, crucially, a lack of general ability to get these conversations started among adult males. A lack of social connectedness poses further difficulties as a manly conversation due to the inherent ‘neediness’ of starting a conversation about it – and the judgment that may ensue.

*“You keep it bottled up and talk about inconsequential things”  
(Male, CALD, Sydney)*

What these men want is to know how to elicit a deeper level of conversation. They may say they are willing to provide support to their friends, but qualitatively they admit that they have little skill and would be very nervous about initiating a conversation about a personal issue facing a male friend.

While men want to be more open with friends, they don't always have the skills or tools to do so.

Ethnographic case study:

**Loose Connector**

A Sri Lankan national, Sunny moved to Australia three years ago on a skilled migration visa with the firm intention to secure a better future for his children. He is reasonably well connected with the Sri Lankan community. Family activities have helped Sunny meet other parents. However, these connections are rather 'loose' and provide little in terms of emotional support. Most discussions feel rather shallow and approaching personal topics is simply impossible.

*"I have to wait for my friends to tell me their problems – then I can share mine"*  
(Male, Sydney)

*"It's the reason men are afraid to share. Other guys lack the skills to deal with it, so they will put you down"* (Male, CALD, Sydney)

*"I wouldn't take the initiative, but I would share if they asked me"* (Male, Unemployed)

*"When I go out with my mates, we're not gonna talk about things that brings us down... even if you want to [talk] - you don't have the opportunities..."* (Male, Outer Metro, Low SES)

*"You want to be there for your friends ... if they have a problem I'd listen, I might tell him to cheer up... I wouldn't really know what to advise. I don't have any answers to life!"*  
(Male, Sydney)

*"There needs to be an easier way to get people to open up... but I don't know what it is"* (Male, Low SES, Outer Metro)

*"Friends of mine. I can see they are not happy, a bit dissatisfied, but what degree you can't tell. And you can drop hints [to see if they want to talk about it] but it's up to them to pick them up [and open up to you]."* (Male, Brisbane)

*"[Circumstances where you can imagine people opening up] There's a lot of stigma... they need permission to open up, your mates would have to know that you are fair dinkum, that you genuinely want to help."* (Male, Brisbane)

For example, men on our vulnerable boards are quick to place the blame on others for their social isolation (e.g. others are arrogant or not ready to help); their focus on their problems also seems to take too much of their lives to be able to truly listen to others, let alone care for others. Improving social skills will go a long way in helping them to solve their social isolation.



#### **Strategic Implication:**

beyondblue could play a role in providing men with the tools and skills to be able to initiate emotional conversations, and developing an understanding of how to respond if someone does initiate this type of conversation with them. This has the added benefit of raising awareness among men that others may indeed be able to support them emotionally – as they feel they can do for others – thereby increasing confidence in initiating these conversations.

### **5.1.2 What specific interventions might work to improve social connectedness?**

#### **Summary:**

Men across the board were most likely to respond to interventions where they felt they are being helpful or needed. They were more responsive to this type of language than the more formal and potentially daunting language of volunteering. While joining a group with a common interest or purpose sounds appealing, for the more poorly connected a new member facilitator to proactively ask people to join and welcome new enquirers will be needed.

**Detail:**

To most effectively reach socially disconnected men, strategies must be unobtrusive, peer-led, purpose-driven, be able to start immediately and provide ongoing support; all in an informal, appealing environment.

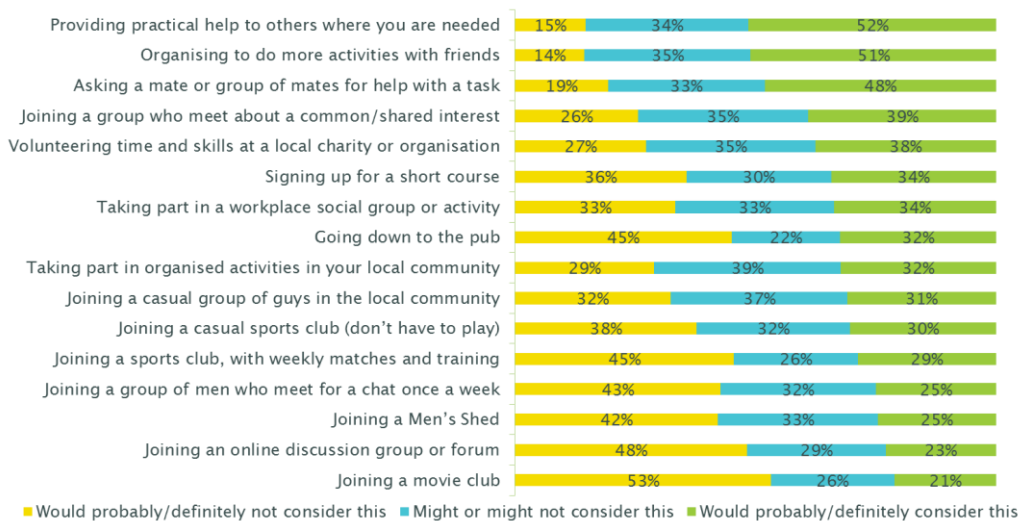
When asked about interventions men would consider if they were going through a lonely patch, over half (52%) would probably or definitely consider providing practical help to others, closely followed by organising to do more activities with friends (51%) and asking mates to help with a task (48%). Note that language around providing practical help to others when needed, selected by over half, is more compelling to these men than the more formal ‘volunteering’ (selected by 38%).

the knowledge audit identified that intervention

**Ethnographic case study:  
Detrimentially Disengaged**

*Daniel moved to Australia around 30 years ago. Following his divorce, and a period of drinking and depression, Daniel sought help through a counsellor and joined a cognitive behavioural therapy group. Daniel has poor social support – he sees his sons fairly regularly, and has one close friend. Despite his repeated assertions to the contrary, it is quite clear that Daniel is deeply dissatisfied with his social connectedness, but will not admit it – to either himself or others. He has tried meeting people through volunteering, and attending groups with limited success. Daniel would attend other groups if needed, for example if he thought he might help others by sharing his experiences of addiction and depression.*

**Figure 46: Appeal of interventions**



11. A lot of men go through a patch where they feel a bit lonely and unsatisfied with their level and quality of friendships. If you were feeling this way, how likely would you be to consider each of the following?  
Base: All respondents, n=3750

The Loose Connectors and Relaxed Charismatics were the most open to the interventions (see Figure 47). The Social Strivers, despite overall poor social connections, were quite open to the idea of these suggestions – this segment might be quite receptive to overtures to help others. The Detrimentially Disengaged and Whateverers were less likely than other segments to consider interventions overall.

Figure 47: Appeal of interventions by segment

Would probably/definitely consider this	Segments					
	Detrimentially Disengaged	Social Strivers	Whateverers	Loose Connectors	Quiet & Content	Relaxed Charismatics
Providing practical help to others where you are needed	26%	65%	34%	71%	44%	79%
Organising to do more activities with friends	20%	60%	34%	68%	54%	79%
Asking a mate or group of mates for help with a task	20%	51%	32%	63%	50%	79%

Across the qualitative group discussions men talked about activities that had helped them, and their ideas for interventions. There were three key themes here:

1. A preference for (re) connecting with people they already know
2. Contributing by helping others/being useful (including volunteering)
3. Meeting others incidentally, through a common interest

For the men on our vulnerable boards, lack of confidence and the fear of non-acceptance appear to be the main factors stopping people from making the first step; a few have suggested that if approached they'd happily oblige to participate in social activities

Four additional interventions were considered and evaluated by our online board. They were:

- Having a 'new member facilitator role' who could meet with new people one on one first, then bring them along to groups for a trial
- Tools to help men plan how they will join a group
- Tools to help men start their own group
- Training tools (for example an online course) that could help men with communication skills

A new member facilitator was the most successful idea explored. Sporting events/clubs and churches were common places suggested to meet people, as this would indicate encountering other individuals with common interests; however these men lacked the confidence to even look it up, let alone enquire and join. The new member facilitator will only be successful if these facilitators are not only there to welcome new enquirers but also to be proactive in asking people to join in their community. A point was also brought up about having meetings in the person's home or "safe spot" to help the participant ease into the transition of social activities.



*“But I really like the idea if there was, or maybe there is, services out there where a member of a men’s club (the manager or whoever) came to your house, sat one on one, talked to you about what’s going on and maybe provide some details on what they do and invite you to come on a trial. I think that would help greatly and give me the motivation to go, as whoever has come to my house has already made me happy that someone is willing to put effort in to help me.”*

*“Breaking the ice is the hardest part, yes I know there is a men's shed nearby, but plucking up the courage to go and see if I'd like it is daunting. I'd rather stay home than meet the challenge. Perhaps if there was a way to talk privately with a member and maybe introduced to the group in a semi-formal way that would be great.”*

Equally, lack of confidence will prevent these men starting their own groups, independent of any resources or facilitation they might get to do so. While the idea of tools for men to start their own groups sounds appealing, it does not seem that it will help those suffering from social isolation.

At first glance, the idea of a community group directory was also found to be appealing, However, if men are not proactive enough to use it, a better solution would be to encourage men to make use of existing resources e.g. through proactive new group member facilitators.

A communication skills course is an appealing idea as the men readily owned up to having problems with self-confidence. However, this kind of course would have to be sustained over a long period of time, be built into the education system and encompass broader issues to do with resilience and a re-framing of some aspects of masculinity for it to be fully successful. It would also have to be very practical and tie in with hands-on activities to be attractive to a broad range of men.

*Training tools to help men open up to friends and family - yes!”(Male, older, outer urban)*

*“I also wonder if some of these short courses could be done not just for fun but with a goal in mind; i.e. a coffee-making course that results in a community event that has the members making and serving coffee, and giving them experience that may make them employable somehow? Or at least providing some sort of goal-oriented course, I think a lot of guys like doing stuff that has a measurable outcome.”*

Finally, the idea of the men’s shed is brought up numerous times unprompted by various participants and suggests a good way for men to interact with other men.

*"I know that some people get a lot out of things like Men's shed etc, so they are worthwhile programs for sure" (Male, Mid-SES)*

The trans\* men had a strong positive reaction to funding being directed at trans\*-specific programs, and feel it is particularly important to be able to interact with other trans\* men. There was broad agreement however that even if a group were trans\* specific, it does not need to be trans\* focussed.

*"Unless they [cis-gender men] are trans experienced or accepting conversations are harder to make flow. Normal things like talking about your past...When you start editing every second thing you say the loneliness creeps in and you feel isolated while sitting in a group! I like meeting trans people for this reason even if we have very little else in common. (Trans\* participant)*

*"Personally I would like to socialize with other trans\* men more without the direct focus being on being a trans\* man, but rather what other aspects of our lives we have. After all it is only one part of a bigger picture- who I am as a man spans a lot of territory and being trans is only one part" (Trans\* participant)*

The response to interventions and programs on our intersex boards varied, with some men responding positively to ideas about intersex-specific interventions, albeit mostly in an informal or peer-led way.

*"Intersex people are not synonymous with "queer" or "LGB" or "LGBTI". We aren't necessarily part of "a community" in the sense of having the same kinds of things in common that LGB people might. Intersex is also not an identity. I think that beyondblue should focus on sharing resources with intersex people and not on "helpers" who impose assistance from outside."*

*"I do like being around other intersex people, especially when we are doing something not intersex-specific like just socialising and talking about who we are and what we enjoy in life. This is most helpful when we are talking about or doing something that has nothing to do with intersex. We are regular people bonding over shared interests, not tokenised."*

*"I think having social groups dedicated to people who have a common interest, or indeed have intersex and wish to meet people in order to relate to others going through similar circumstances is worthwhile."*

Others on the board were supportive of general groups with common interests.





*“I joined Meetup several years ago and have made some really valuable friends, some come into my life and drift out, but I have made a core group of friends from various interest groups in Meetup that are long-standing.”*

*“So I am interested in ways of meeting people, but I don't feel the urge to make friends with other intersex people, I just want to make friends, no matter what their medical/social/cultural background/history.”*

**Strategic Implications:**

A number of the proposed interventions found some resonance among the men in our sample, while certain segments of the population have stronger barriers that need to be overcome.

Positioning interventions to men as opportunities to provide help to others, and where they are needed, rather than the more formal and intimidating connotations of ‘volunteering’, will be more likely to appeal to men experiencing patches of loneliness.

## 5.2 What is the role of the internet and social media in connectedness?

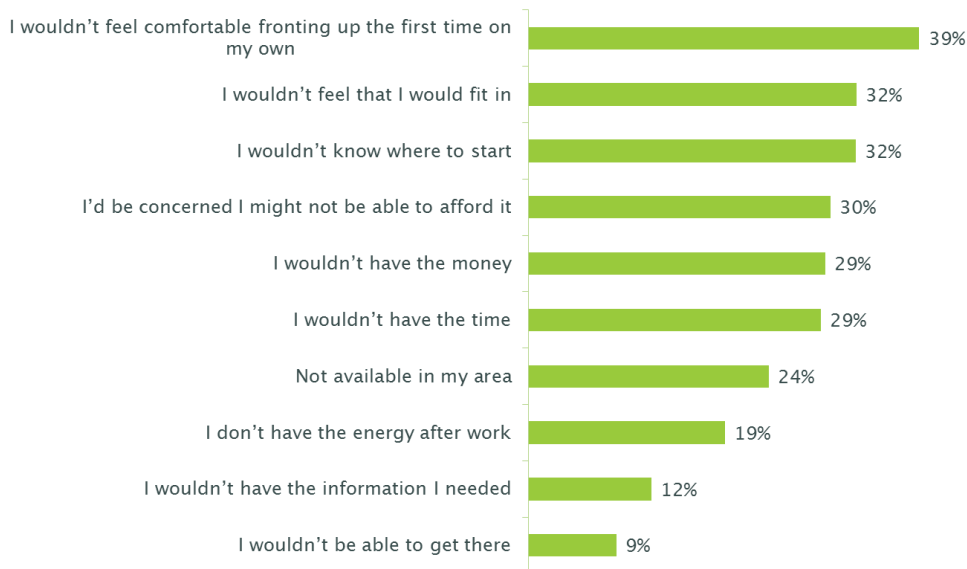
### Summary:

Barriers to taking part in these activities have to do with the apprehension men feel about interacting with strangers, and with men exhibiting discomfort and lack of confidence about joining these groups. Men also needed to overcome the inertia or lack of drive to join any groups or activities.

### Detail:

The biggest barrier to taking part in an activity or group to combat periods of loneliness is not feeling comfortable fronting up the first time on their own, selected as a barrier by four in ten men (39%). This barrier held across age groups, ATSI background, and life stage. Not feeling comfortable was less of a barrier for men from a CALD background (31% compared to 40% of men from non-CALD backgrounds). Those who were unemployed and looking for work (46%) and those no longer looking for work (54%) were more likely to indicate that feeling uncomfortable turning up on their own would prevent them from joining a group or activity. Around a third of men (32%) indicated they wouldn't feel they would fit in or wouldn't know where to start. Homosexual men were significantly more likely than heterosexual men to indicate that feeling that they wouldn't fit in would prevent them from joining (50% compared to 31%).

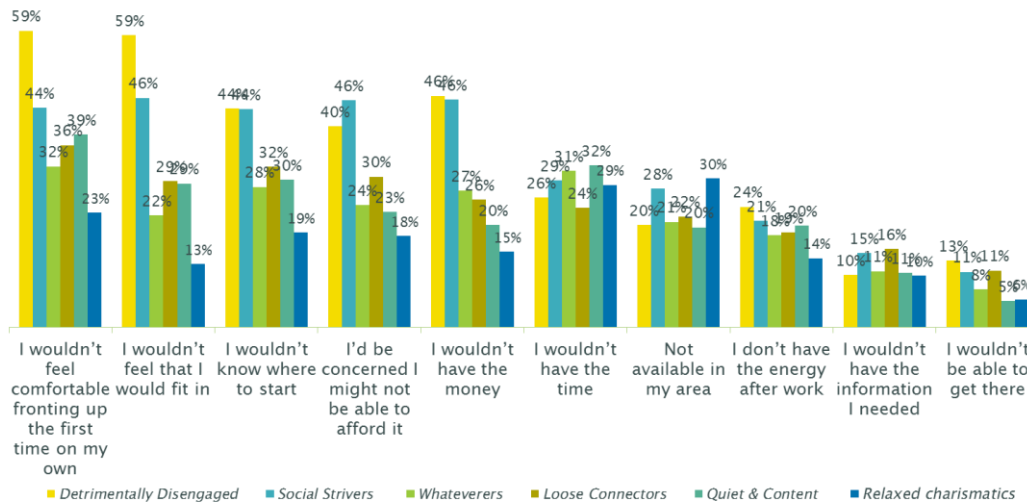
Figure 48: Barriers to interventions



12. If you were feeling a bit lonely and unsatisfied with your level and quality of friendships, what, if anything, would prevent you from taking part in these types of activities and groups? Base: Respondents who would consider at least one of the suggested group activities, n=3528

The two segments with the poorest social connections, the Detrimentially Disengaged and the Social Strivers, had greater barriers to the interventions than the other segments. For instance, six out of ten (59%) of the Detrimentially Disengaged indicated they wouldn't feel comfortable going on their own to a group, and the same proportion (59%) wouldn't feel they would fit in. For this group, the new facilitator role might be particularly effective in overcoming some of these barriers.

Figure 49: Barriers by segment



12. If you were feeling a bit lonely and unsatisfied with your level and quality of friendships, what, if anything, would prevent you from taking part in these types of activities and groups? Base: Respondents who would consider at least one of the suggested group activities, n=3528

Qualitatively, barriers to taking part in these activities have to do with the apprehension men feel interacting with strangers; especially if that interaction involves 'talking' rather than a shared (initially silent) activity.



*“Getting out and joining in with others is hard, especially if it is in an area where you don't know anybody. It can be, and is daunting to go to a new place voluntarily to join in activities, even if you like them, joining a men's shed where together men do activities which we all would do in our own shed, but have others to share stories with would be good, but I can't just go, I'm not sure how I'll be received. I think it's the fear of non-acceptance or not being good enough at doing things that hold me back, and I don't think I'm alone in this feeling.” (Male, Vulnerable board participant)*

*“With me the problem is self-esteem and possible lack of acceptance. I think the best anyone could do with a similar person is to accompany them - preferably to somewhere they are themselves known. Could help to have a few other members clued up (confidentially) on the new person's character and doubts. They need to be made feel welcome from the start or the first visit is likely to be the last.” (Male, Vulnerable board participant)*

**Strategic Implication:**

Joining a group where men have a common interest or purpose appeals; however, for many men a new member facilitator, who proactively invites and brings men along to these groups will be required to a) make them feel needed and invited and b) overcome the intimidation of attending a group on their own.

## 6. Recommendations and next steps

### 6.1 *Raising awareness*

Framing social connectedness as a protective factor against psychological distress, rather than as a pathway to isolation and depression and anxiety, is a positive, inclusive message for *beyondblue* to promote. Social connectedness is not seen as an important social issue by men, and the link to other social issues is not readily recognised or understood. *beyondblue* could facilitate understanding of the association between social connectedness, suicide and depression, further highlighting this important social issue.

Men were not convinced that the issue requires an ambassador or spokesperson, though in the discussion groups the idea that men would talk about this experience, and what they did to come out the other side, did generate some enthusiasm (most were aware of the way depression has been put on the agenda using this approach).

*“It would help to hear how other people had overcome the issue [of poor social connections]. Everyone has a story, just listening to you guys has been a great help. Sometimes you think you are the only one on the planet. It can be good to find out that someone else has been there.” (Male, Brisbane)*

Many men would like the opportunity to be more open about their problems and more open emotionally with their friends, potentially leading to improved satisfaction with their friendships: a protective factor against psychological distress. However, while men considered themselves able to provide support to their friends (70%), they felt this was not returned, with only 48% feeling their friends provided sufficient emotional support. This indicates that perhaps men are mistaken – more of their friends are likely to be able to be relied upon than they think.

Raising awareness among men that many men are in the same position as them, and would like to open up more emotionally, may address some of the hesitation men feel in initiating these conversations. Most men will undoubtedly go through many life events that may impact on their social connectedness and yet they are unlikely to *seek* help; encouraging men to *offer* help and support to their friends going through difficulties may be an effective way of improving general connectedness.

A perception that men will lose respect if and when they talk about their problems is a potential barrier for those in the most disconnected segments. A re-framing or positioning of help-seeking behaviours to be a more masculine trait – the sign of a strong man, not a weak or needy man – would help lower these barriers.

## 6.2 Programs and tools

Understanding the barriers and drivers, response to interventions and experience of social connectedness, there are a number of programs and tools *beyondblue* could support to facilitate social support. A few overarching principles may help guide development of programs:

- Recognising that broad but unspoken awareness and experience of widespread social disconnection exists will allow information, programs and activities to be more readily accepted and adopted by men.
- Different cultural norms are likely to have a strong impact on men's ability to maintain social connection, and this will need to be taken into account when designing programs for a multicultural society like Australia.
- Cultural background appears to influence what men expect from their friendships and this must be taken into account when designing programs or tools for different groups.

### 6.2.1 Helping other/volunteering

Men respond well to being needed and eschew being seen as needy. Being 'needed' does not have connotations of seeking help, and removes the self-stigma attached to reaching out that some of these men experience. Making men feel necessary and useful appears the best way to draw them into the community and into contact with others. However, the language of 'volunteering' seems to be more formal and potentially daunting for these men, raising issues around self-confidence and discomfort in joining groups. As such, positioning opportunities to volunteer as 'helping others', with messaging emphasising how needed these men are to help, is more likely to appeal.

### 6.2.2 Promoting community involvement

Men with stronger support were more likely to feel like they are part of the community, and were more likely to be satisfied with the extent to which they feel like part of the community. Encouraging men to become involved in their community may improve men's satisfaction as they can potentially form friendships with a broader range of people.

### 6.2.3 Building resilience in men

Helping men to build resilience would seem to have multiple benefits – reducing psychological distress, and increasing levels of satisfaction. This may be important at particular points where men may become vulnerable to social isolation, such as becoming unemployed. The Australian Government now recognises the importance of resilience<sup>17</sup> and its connection to wellbeing, and building resilience in children is supported in schools through a range of programs (e.g. The Resilient Schools Program). Helping men build their level of resilience could be an opportunity for *beyondblue* to provide support for men to develop and maintain their connectedness and wellbeing. Fathers in particular, given their

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<sup>17</sup> <https://education.gov.au/student-resilience-and-wellbeing>

importance in modelling relationships, could be encouraged to develop resilience in their sons through programs provided by *beyondblue*. By helping develop resilience in their sons, fathers are also learning how to build resilience in themselves.

#### **6.2.4 Online tools**

There is the opportunity to provide men with the tools to improve their social connections in two ways – improving the quality of connections, and improving the level of connections.

##### **1. Improving the quality of connections: tools for initiating and providing emotional support**

- Many men would like to be more open with friends and have friends be more open with them, but acknowledge they don't know how to initiate these conversations.
- Some men also accept that they would not know how to respond if men began these conversations with them.
- Providing online support, tips and tools is a potential role for *beyondblue*, particularly considering their experience in this area (e.g. beginning the conversation from *beyondblue*'s guide for carers).
- This could include how to approach and initiate conversations, and concrete examples of how to respond when other men open up to them.

##### **2. Improving the level of social connectedness: tools to overcome the potentially daunting task of joining groups or activities.**

- A key barrier for many men in joining activities or groups is not knowing if they will fit in, and the anxiety and discomfort of the unknown.
- Online tools to reassure men that experiencing these feelings is quite common, and guiding them through the process of joining and what the experience may be like, could make these steps seem less daunting.
- Rather than *beyondblue* creating an activity-based website, alerting men to the types of places where they can access information about groups and activities may be more efficient. There are websites already dedicated to sports and group activities that men can make use of (e.g. MeetUp, gumtree, local council websites) – *beyondblue*'s challenge may instead be trying to get men to use the websites.

#### **6.2.5 A group facilitator role**

Among more vulnerable men the idea of a facilitator, someone whom they could meet with prior to joining the group, feel comfortable with, and make them feel invited rather than needy, was very compelling. Providing materials and support for clubs to provide this role seems to be a particular opportunity for *beyondblue*.

There does seem to be scope to extend this idea beyond new members. Men who may fall out of contact with a group, for example a member of a sports team who becomes injured, could be

encouraged by a group facilitator to stay involved in some way (e.g. scoring, admin etc.) – keeping them connected to the group and feeling needed.

### **6.2.6 Broadening the base for Men's Sheds members**

Men's Sheds, which were discussed in groups across the study, give men a practical purpose (in this case building things), so that they can 'talk sideways' while maintaining and building connections. Across the groups and boards the idea of the Men's Shed resonated. *beyondblue* could advocate for Men's Sheds to broaden its membership base to include younger men. Encouraging younger men to join might involve reaching out to younger men (perhaps through the group facilitator role) as well as considering practical ideas such as holding sheds after work hours or on weekends.

Other examples of men's groups can be found everywhere. Some are community non-profits: Community Hackerspace<sup>18</sup> offers outlets for (mostly) men getting together to work with technology. Others are community-driven enterprises: Kustom Kommune<sup>19</sup> offers a space where (mostly) men can work on motorcycles. In both cases men can share their expertise for the benefit of others – and gain status and acceptance.

Another interesting example here is the Pirates Sporting Club<sup>20</sup>; this is a multi-sport club involved in semi-competitive cycling, rowing and swimming. Including a number of different sports broadens the base and allows more men to be involved – it provides a reason to be a spectator/supporter at other sports, or to 'have a go' at a sport that may not be their main focus. The name highlights that the purpose of the club is not entirely serious – broadening their appeal and ensuring even greater inclusivity. The club has grown rapidly while other cycling, rowing and swimming clubs are struggling for members, and they are planning charity activities, such as doing the 'Around the Bay in a Day' on the City of Melbourne's commuter cycles to raise funds for the Smith family.

Others again can be less formal networks, such as 'Important Men's Business', an established, regular, scheduled (first Wednesday of the month) monthly gathering of local men who are mostly fathers of young children – the group was established through the partners of those in a local mother's group. Having expanded through interaction with other fathers at the park and in the street it brings together a diverse (including recent migrants, CALD) range of up to 45 men every month to 'solve the problems of the world' at a local pub in Kensington. This demonstrates that men don't necessarily need a higher purpose for getting together, just a reasonable excuse

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.hackmelbourne.org/>

<sup>19</sup> [www.kustomkommune.com.au](http://www.kustomkommune.com.au)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.piratessportingclub.com/>



## 6.3 Subgroup suggestions

The needs of the trans\* and intersex communities with respect social connections, healthcare and resources are clearly different, and services and organisations need to remember that any intervention strategies or programs would need to be developed with these differences in mind.

### 6.3.1 Trans\*

Almost every participant on our trans\* board cited the need for more funding for trans\* specific programs; the people and the ideas already exist, but they require support to allow for these resources to be more accessible to the community.

### 6.3.2 Intersex

Encouraging intersex individuals to increase their level of social connections may need to be approached separately from the interventions recommended by this study, and certainly not in the context of “male” connectedness. Although the intersex individuals we spoke with on our board more strongly identified themselves as male, they see themselves as sitting on a gender spectrum, and also indicated that they would prefer non-gender specific social activities. There does seem to be some interest in peer-led groups to provide support for intersex individuals, however further research into the appeal of this idea would be warranted before development.



*“In particular, intersex is NOT an identity and has nothing to do with my being a gay man. A lot of gay men in Sydney actually exclude me from being considered part of their social circle because I am intersex-- even when they still invite me to stuff, I have heard them make statements that made me feel othered and tokenised.” (Intersex participant)*

*“But most of the time, the people who have helped me the most as an intersex man are not counsellors or therapists, they are other intersex people who understand my experiences and make me feel like I am normal and fine just the way I am. Intersex is about people's bodies being born or developing at puberty in a way that isn't considered strictly female or male nowadays. LGB groups haven't been helpful and neither have counsellors. Peer support from other intersex (not “queer” or “LGBTI”) people has been the most helpful and affirming.” (Intersex participant)*

### 6.3.3 ATSI (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples)

Men with ATSI backgrounds did not have significantly different levels of social support from those from non-ATSI backgrounds. They are more likely to experience barriers to opening up emotionally amongst friends and want this to improve. They also experienced higher levels of self-stigma. Their main barriers to joining an activity or group are discomfort to turning up on their own. Based on this research,

men from ATSI backgrounds do not need a different approach to facilitating social connectedness than those recommended above; however, qualitative research to explore the appropriateness of these ideas in depth may be helpful in confirming this.

### **6.3.4 CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse)**

The findings suggest that men from CALD backgrounds are more socially active than their non-CALD counterparts; while they appear to have strong social connections, they are perhaps less satisfied with their ability to open up emotionally to their friends. CALD groups could benefit from a range of tools to facilitate initiating and responding to more personal, open conversations. Further research is required to understand whether CALD-specific resources in this area would be required.

### **6.3.5 Age**

Social connectedness declines in the middle years, with lower social support scores reported by respondents between the ages of 35 and 54. Men aged 60-65 have stronger social support than the other age group, and also appear to be more satisfied with the quality of relationships and the number of friends/acquaintances they have. The 60-65 year olds had slightly higher levels of resilience, reinforcing the importance of developing resilience in men in their middle years.

There is a clear generational association with the desire for more personal conversations: the 18-29 year old group is more likely to want to engage in more open, emotional conversations compared with those over 55, indicating a 'hardening' over the middle years.

### **6.3.6 Sexuality**

There were a small number of significant differences in social connectedness by sexual orientation. Gay/bisexual men were significantly more likely to rate lack of social support/loneliness as an important issue than heterosexual men, and they were also significantly more likely to rate discrimination as an important social issue. Those who identify as gay or bisexual were less likely to be satisfied with the quality of their relationships, but were equally satisfied with the number of friends and acquaintances they have and the extent to which they feel like a member of the community. Gay men were also significantly more likely than heterosexual men to indicate that feeling like they don't fit in would prevent them from joining in groups or activities. In the qualitative discussion groups, the level of social acceptance of their sexuality and ingrained biases in the rest of the community were, they felt, the main reasons gay and bisexual men experience social disconnection. Some felt that the greater difficulties experienced in forming families also impact on their longer term social connectedness. Communications material that doesn't rely on (for example) images of women and families will be more appropriate for this group and ensure they don't feel further excluded. Ensuring that this is targeted through non-mainstream media will be more effective.

Broader strategies to increase inclusion at the community level, and reduce discrimination experienced by some of these men are therefore warranted to support their connection within the broader community.

### Segments - from poorest to strongest social connections

Segment	Summary	Recommendations
<b>Detrimentially Disengaged</b>	The Detrimentially Disengaged have the lowest levels of social support and the lowest levels of satisfaction, however they also have some of the biggest barriers to seeking help – financial, health issues, high levels of self-stigma and low levels of help-seeking behaviour. They claim they are unwilling to change, yet their levels of satisfaction suggest otherwise. However, they may lack the social skills required to build their networks, let alone maintain and deepen relationships.	These men may benefit in particular from having a facilitator - someone to make them feel needed and invited will be key. Any interventions need to be framed so that they are not associated with help-seeking.
<b>Social Strivers</b>	Social Strivers have poorer social connections and would like these to improve, but don't know how to go about it. Nearly three-quarters of this group, more than any other segment, say they have many acquaintances but fewer real friends than they would like, and that they have also lost contact with more people than they would have liked.	In many ways, this segment has similar, yet less strong, patterns and behaviours to the Detrimentially Disengaged. Despite similar barriers, they are open to interventions and try to be proactive socially. These men should be encouraged to join groups or activities.
<b>Whateverers</b>	This segment wouldn't mind more friends, but are more or less satisfied with their current social connections and certainly don't see social connections outside of family and work as a priority. They are unlikely to seek out new friends and are not particularly open with these friends, nor do they wish to be. They do have lower self-stigma and higher levels of help-seeking, suggesting that this segment will seek out resources if needed.	Overall this segment is unlikely to respond to proactive approaches to increase social support – it simply is not a priority for many. Encouragingly, they are likely to seek out help if needed, so ensuring this segment is aware of the resources available, if required, should be the focus.

<p><b>Loose Connectors</b></p>	<p>Loose Connectors have lots of acquaintances and have no trouble meeting new people, but describe these as acquaintances rather than real friends. They seem to have an inability to open up emotionally (they’d feel worse about themselves if they couldn’t solve their own problems and wouldn’t know what to say to a friend asking for help) and strongly adhere to male stereotypes. However, over half wish they could have more open conversations about personal issues with friends.</p>	<p>These men are likely to respond to interventions, and have low barriers to joining groups, yet are really in need of developing emotionally supportive relationships with others. This group seems particularly receptive to online engagement and approaches.</p> <p>The challenge will be in positioning the online tools to help with emotional engagement in such a way as to not alienate this group (by making them feel ‘needy’ or ‘less masculine’).</p> <p>This segment have low barriers to reaching out, and could be ‘facilitators’ encouraging others to join groups and activities.</p>
<p><b>Quiet and Content</b></p>	<p>These are men who are happy with a smaller number of deeper, more enduring and emotionally supportive relationships. Though overall they have slightly less support than the Relaxed Charismatics, they are mostly very satisfied with the level and quality of friends.</p>	<p>This segment are less likely to respond to interventions, but chiefly because they do not have unmet needs in terms of social connections.</p>
<p><b>Relaxed Charismatics</b></p>	<p>This segment has the highest level of satisfaction and of social support. They maintain old friends, whilst continuing to form new ones through a wide variety of avenues. They have no hesitation in opening up or asking for help from their group of friends.</p>	<p>This group are unlikely to need help developing or maintaining relationships with others. They would be ideal to act in the facilitator role – reaching out to the more isolated and encouraging them to join groups or activities.</p>

## 6.4 Next Steps

There is a clear opportunity for *beyondblue* to play a leadership role in this area, collaborating with other organisations to raise awareness of this important social issue. A roundtable type event with other parties with an interest in this issue seems an ideal way in which to start developing the partnerships that will be required to effectively develop and execute the strategies articulated in this document.

## 7. Appendix

### 7.1 *The segmentation analysis*

In designing the questionnaire for the study, great attention was paid to incorporating a range of measures that would be highly suited to the analysis that was proposed. This meant including a considerable number of questions requiring responses to a five-point scale. Such a scale was felt more likely to allow individual survey respondents to give a considered and personalised response to questions, and hence enable the differences and similarities between them to be more readily identified via the statistical analysis.

Having assembled a dataset that was well-suited to the intended analysis, the next stage was a factor analysis which identified the variables of social connectedness that had the highest levels of variance across the dataset. These variables were the basis of the segmentation analysis and covered areas such as the type of social connections these men have, how satisfied they are with their social life, life events that have affected their social lives and how they feel about opening up to other men about personal issues.

A statistical technique called latent class analysis was used to identify the segments. Latent class analysis allows us to identify subtypes using both observed and unobservable cases; i.e. we were able to identify categories based on the presence and absence of certain attitudes or behaviours.

The analysis was run for a range of solutions, each with different numbers of potential segments (ranging from three to ten). Each solution was then checked against key evaluation criteria – whether the component segments were large enough to be usable, whether each segment was able to be understood, and whether the segments were distinct from each other. The preferred set of solutions was narrowed down to those with between 5 and seven segments by a process of elimination against key evaluation criteria. The final decision on our preferred segmentation was made on the basis of the following process:

- Particular segments appeared in more than one solution, e.g. men who were really socially disconnected and were resistant to change;
- These 'matching' segments were compared with each other in terms of their social connectedness, nature of relationships and interactions and attitudes towards opening up about personal issues and seeking help, as well as their demographics and other characteristics;
- This process allowed us to isolate the segments that were the clearest (most distinctive and readily understood) and strongest;
- Beyond a six-segment solution, the only real difference was that the two polar segments (those most socially disconnected and most socially connected) split into smaller segments on the basis of the strength of their opinions;
- However, closer assessment of those smaller segments showed them to be neither particularly distinctive nor meaningful.

As a result, our preferred segmentation solution contains six segments.

		Detrimentially Disengaged	Quiet & Content	Relaxed charismatic	Loose Connector	Social Striver	Whateverer	NET
<b>Age</b>	30-34	14%	15%	13%	24%	12%	13%	15%
	35-39	13%	16%	12%	17%	19%	16%	15%
	40-44	16%	17%	12%	14%	15%	17%	15%
	45-49	15%	15%	13%	14%	15%	17%	15%
	50-54	20%	11%	13%	13%	13%	16%	14%
	55-59	14%	12%	18%	9%	13%	12%	13%
	60-65	9%	15%	19%	9%	12%	9%	12%
<b>State/ Territory</b>	NSW	28%	33%	32%	38%	31%	34%	32%
	VIC	26%	23%	26%	24%	22%	30%	25%
	QLD	23%	19%	19%	20%	22%	17%	20%
	WA	11%	12%	11%	9%	13%	8%	11%
	SA	8%	8%	9%	6%	7%	7%	8%
	TAS	2%	2%	2%	2%	3%	3%	2%
	ACT	2%	2%	1%	1%	2%	2%	2%
<b>Location</b>	NT	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%
	A capital city	66%	71%	65%	64%	64%	67%	66%
	A regional centre	21%	19%	21%	25%	22%	21%	21%
	A country town	10%	8%	11%	9%	12%	10%	10%
	A rural or remote locality	3%	2%	3%	3%	3%	2%	3%
<b>CALD status</b>	CALD	10%	12%	16%	31%	13%	21%	16%
	Non-CALD	88%	87%	84%	67%	87%	78%	83%
	DK/PNTS	1%	1%	0%	2%	0%	1%	1%
<b>Highest level of educatio n</b>	Primary/ Lower secondary school	21%	15%	12%	9%	15%	18%	15%
	Secondary school – Year 12 or equivalent	17%	15%	13%	11%	11%	15%	14%
	TAFE/ College	32%	30%	30%	28%	39%	29%	32%
	University	29%	39%	45%	51%	35%	37%	39%
	Prefer not to answer	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%
<b>Employ ment status</b>	Working full time	47%	64%	63%	65%	54%	61%	58%
	Working part time/ casual	13%	12%	13%	13%	12%	14%	13%
	Retired	11%	13%	15%	6%	10%	10%	11%

<b>Living situation</b>	Unemployed and looking for work	11%	5%	6%	8%	12%	7%	8%
	Unemployed , not looking for work	8%	2%	1%	4%	4%	3%	4%
	Student	2%	1%	1%	1%	3%	2%	1%
	Disability pension	8%	2%	1%	2%	5%	2%	4%
	Caring/ Home duties	1%	2%	0%	1%	1%	0%	1%
	Living on my own	24%	13%	13%	15%	19%	14%	16%
	Living with children	40%	45%	45%	50%	44%	46%	45%
	Living with a partner - no children	21%	30%	34%	22%	26%	27%	27%
	Living with friends	3%	4%	4%	5%	3%	3%	4%
	Living with parents or family	10%	5%	2%	5%	6%	7%	6%
<b>Sexual orientation</b>	Homosexual (gay)	7%	6%	6%	6%	3%	4%	6%
	Heterosexual (straight)	84%	89%	91%	82%	91%	89%	88%
	Bisexual	4%	2%	1%	5%	4%	1%	3%
	Queer	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%

### 7.1.1 Model factors

The following factors and questions were included in the confirmatory factor analysis:

Factor	Questions
<b>Lack of social support</b>	With the people I know the conversation stays on a casual level and we rarely talk about our feelings I am able to rely on my close friends for emotional support My friends can rely on me for emotional support
<b>Self-efficacy</b>	I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself I can perform effectively on many different tasks Compared to other people, I can do most tasks very well
<b>Social drift</b>	Over the last few years I have lost contact with more people than I would have liked I've always found it difficult to meet new people I have more close friends than I used to I am the one who keeps our social group together and initiates contact I feel like I'm part of a community
<b>Resilience</b>	I bounce back quickly after hard times I have a hard time making it through stressful events It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event It is hard for me to snap back when something bad happens I come through difficult times with little trouble I take a long time to get over set-backs in my life
<b>Satisfaction</b>	Satisfied with the kinds of relationships you have with your family and friends I am close to my family Satisfaction with the number of friends/acquaintances you have Satisfaction with the quality of relationships with friends/family you have



## 7.2 Ethnographic case studies and boards

### 7.2.1 Ethnographic case studies

#### Case Study – Detrimentially Disengaged Segment

*Though deeply dissatisfied with their social connectedness, the Detrimentially Disengaged segment is least likely to do anything about it. The idea of being with new people makes them anxious. They tend to be unable to keep old friends or make new ones, and have the lowest level of social support, making them particularly at risk*

#### Introducing Daniel

Daniel moved to Australia around 30 years ago (when he was in his early 30s) with his Australian-born wife. He was quite successful in his career – a self-confessed workaholic. However, after discovering his wife was having an affair, he left his wife and sons which led to a period of drinking and depression, and finally hospitalisation. He saw a counsellor, attended CBT group counselling for his drinking and depression, and is on a disability pension. He now claims to be quite content with his life, and is happy to have formed a good relationship with his sons.

#### Satisfaction with his social life

Daniel's position is that he doesn't have much of a social life, but he is happy with it this way. However, it is quite clear that this is false bravado and that he desperately wants and needs more social connections.

*“No, I don't think I'm a lonely man...I'm out every day...I salute people on the street”.*

On reflection, he would be keen to do more and have more social connections, and is quite lonely and isolated. His bravado and insistence that he is not lonely acts as a protective mechanism.

Daniel has lost groups of friends as he has moved 'geographically and mentally' through life. He was reliant on his wife's friends when first establishing himself in Australia, leaving him vulnerable and isolated after the marriage breakdown.

*“They say you lose half your friends when you get divorced... because I was so dependent on my wife I lost far in excess of that... and because I wasn't well I didn't want to make new friends. Today I have one good friend... an 83 year old widow... that's my closest friendship...”*

Daniel has chosen not to get seriously involved with women: he has dated briefly, but ended these when he saw signs that they wanted a relationship. He is concerned how a partner would interfere with his life and routine, but this also appears to be a response to the trust issues and hurt from his marriage breakdown.

Social support is limited. While he maintains a good relationship with his sons, he doesn't open up to them with his problems. He does have a counsellor but often it is his GP, whom he sees once a month for his prescriptions, whom he relies on for support.

*"I try not to worry my family... I don't want to burden them."*

### **Most valuable aspects of social life**

Daniel's sons seem to be the only regular relationships he maintains, and he speaks fondly of them. He speaks with them over the phone or on Facebook on a regular basis, and visits them in Melbourne, going to museums, galleries, or the opera.

*"We have common interests... so there is always an excuse to get together... and that's very important to me."*

Of all the different aspects of his life, Daniel talks most passionately about the internet – his sons introduced him to computers and the internet, and part of its initial appeal was that it was an activity he could do with his sons.

For Daniel, the internet was almost transformational...for the first time he was able to find information and understand more about his depression, and connect with others who were in similar situations.

*"The arrival of the internet made a big difference... for me I was no longer a single man living alone. I had a line of communication to the outside world... I was living alone but not feeling it... It helped me understand I wasn't the only one... for a time I thought I was the only human on the planet who was going through what I was going through..."*

Although Daniel uses the internet for news and information, and to undertake courses and the like, in many respects it his only consistent social interactivity – he posts to blogs and communicates with others on forums, and uses Facebook to check in on his sons.

*"I don't know what I would do without [the internet], I suppose I'd be one of those lonely, grumpy old men."*

### **Solutions for a more fulfilled social life**

- Daniel volunteers at a local community hospital, and has previously volunteered with Rotary – this volunteering gives him a purpose (it gets him out of the house, and gives him something to do), and makes him feel useful. However, he hasn't developed any friendships from the volunteering, putting this down to the geographic distance between members.
- Daniel would consider joining a local poetry group – he writes poetry and has a poetry blog. However he would be unlikely to start the group himself – it would simply be too hard.
- If asked, he would be happy to help support a group of people who are going through similar challenges to those that he has faced.

## Case Study – Quiet and Content Segment

*While the Quiet and Content segment do not have a particularly large social network, they appear to be highly satisfied with the friendships they have. They focus more on the few close friendships they have, which enables them to open up emotionally, rather than spending time with acquaintances and more casual conversation.*

### Introducing Paul

Paul is 63 years old and lives with his partner, who is a full time lawyer, and his daughter in a home owned by his partner.

Paul is a French teacher. For 20 years he worked full time at a private school, however, a few years ago he was made redundant. He is currently employed casually, and has found the transition from full time work to casual work difficult. While Paul does not currently work full time, money is not an issue as his partner works full time as a lawyer and many of the activities he occupies himself with are free of charge.

France and French make up a big part of Paul's interests. He is heavily involved with school curriculums, organising French camps (including ones overseas) and helping HSC students. Paul spent eight years living in Paris, and some of the friendships that developed there are maintained today. Paul is also highly engaged with his local church groups. He attends three church services on Sunday. He describes himself as highly spiritual, having deep friendships with people at Church.

### Satisfaction with his social life

Broadly speaking, Paul is satisfied with his social life, although he recognises a lack of close, deep relationships. He doesn't mind if he is surrounded by a lot of people or a small group of people. Paul doesn't have a lot of close friends, but he has many acquaintances, neighbours, people he works with and other colleagues.

Having a close relationship with his daughter, Claire, is important to him. In a way he lives his life around his daughter, taking her to Guides on the weekend, to her part time work at McDonalds and to see her friends.

Friday night is the highlight of Paul's week. On Fridays the neighbours get together at one of their houses. The evening is casual, and spontaneous, with different neighbours bringing food and beverages. They typically sit around a small fire and chat and catch up on the week.

Paul enjoys his work; so much so that a day spent coaching HSC students was so enjoyable that, 'I just wouldn't call that work'. He enjoys being around people who have the same interests as him. He enjoys doing things that are French, and helping people enjoy it as much as he does. He also appreciates the relationships that have come about from teaching French at various schools as well as marking.

*"I wouldn't call them deep friendships, but they are friendships that are formed during the year. I know them through marking; we have known each other for a while."*

Through his close associations with his local church, Paul has been able to develop close relationships which he values highly.

*"I've got deep, spiritual friendships there at Church and we can talk about God, and about Jesus and the things that we have in common, and we can pray together if there's a need."*

Life, says Paul, can get in the way of reconnecting with old friends. He sees that his own life is very busy, which is a barrier to reconnecting with old friends, but he also has a perception that old friends' lives are also too busy to want to, or be able to, maintain a relationship.

Deep, close relationships are lacking in Paul's life. He unfortunately lost a very close friend with whom he was able to discuss deep personal issues. He recognises that he has not been able to develop friendship(s) as close as the one he had.

*"The best friend I ever had died, he was 65 and a paraplegic, and I'd been friends with him for over 20 years. We would talk, and share and do things, and I do miss that a little bit now. I don't feel that I've got anybody I can share things with, if I have a real deep problem that I want to talk to somebody about... however, I've got my partner and my daughter."*

*"I'd prefer to have a friend that I could go and visit and see, confide in and talk with. But on the whole I'm a very sort of happy, positive person. Gee I have some good whinges though, if something's wrong I whinge a lot about it."*

### **Solutions for a more fulfilled social life**

- Paul recognises that some men who are perhaps shy or embarrassed may benefit from a new member facilitator, however, he feels that this system would not benefit him. He's joined groups in the past, for example gyms/swimming groups, but has no desire to join any such groups at the moment.
- He sees having become involved with his local church as a means of connecting with like-minded people, and he has benefited emotionally from these connections. A church he belonged to previously had a special café which was opened up for people to just go and be and where people could meet and chat.
- He recognises the role his daughter plays in his family's social life. Over time, he has been able to meet parents of his daughter's friends. However, he does recognise his inability to generate 'small talk' in some circumstances and so prefers to spend time with people he knows well.

- Online tools for men which contain information on how to join a group, and details of the group, mean that the process of enquiry is discreet and enables men to make such enquiries in their own time.
- Starting his own group might be a bit difficult; he sees the logistics of this process getting in the way... how would Paul go about finding people for his group?
- Training courses are highly appealing to Paul. He sees that he has difficulty talking to people in social situations, especially when he does not know anybody. He rarely finds himself in situations like this, but recognises that an online courses may help him talk to people he has just met. He also recognises a need for courses which help men learn to talk to close friends about emotionally difficult topics.

## Case Study – Relaxed Charismatic Segment

*The segment with the strongest social networks. They have a high ability to maintain old friendships and initiate new ones; they are less likely to be limited by time and financial constraints. Also they have no barriers to opening up emotionally to their friends or asking for help.*

### Introducing Richard

Richard is 46 years old, is married and has one daughter, and his wife is currently pregnant with their second child.

He emigrated from South Africa 26 years ago. His mother still lives in Cape Town (although plans to move to Australia soon to be able to be around her grandkids). Richard has five brothers (some are step-brothers and some half-brothers).

Richard worked for 20 years at one company, before being retrenched. Following this he held a 2-year contract position at an electronic ticketing company. Now that the contract is up, he is working part-time at a boating accessories company in Lane Cove. He works around 4 days a week.

### Satisfaction with his social life

Richard is highly satisfied with his social life. He is very close with his five brothers, and their wives are all friends as well. Richard plays guitar in a band with his oldest brother and some mates. You'll find Richard amongst a small group of close friends, rather than in a bigger crowd of people (especially where it's loud and people need to compete with the music to have a conversation).

*“I'm not a big crowds person, don't enjoy being amongst a lot of people, e.g. clubs, I find myself sitting contemplating my naval. I don't like to compete against loud noises of music. It's definitely not for me. I do like to be amongst people, but not big crowds. I like the company of others I'm not very good at my own company. So I have a good bunch of mates, I really enjoy that. I just don't like to be amongst a huge crowd. It's not my scene.”*

Richard thoroughly enjoys outdoor activities, and much of his social life takes place outdoors, boating, fishing, kayaking or riding bikes. There is always something going on.

*“In my spare time, I'm a casual guitarist, I ride mountain bikes, I enjoy things that happen, excitement I guess, surfing, kayaking, I have a motor boat, I play in a band that my older brother started.”*

Richard typically doesn't have feelings of being lonely or disconnected. He puts this down to being happily married, with one child and another one on the way. The relationships he has are “pretty good”, and...

*“... I tend to get on with most people. I am one of six brothers and get on pretty well with everyone. I don't struggle with relationships.”*

*“In terms of socialising, I’m not a crowd kind of a person, I don’t enjoy being in crowds but at the same time I don’t enjoy being alone either. I like to be with people I know and with whom I get on well.”*

Richard, however, does not have a positive relationship with his father and feels that this relationship is not working. It is a relationship he wants to work on in the future.

### **Solutions for a more fulfilled social life**

Richard’s social life is activities-based. He is proud of his ‘boy’s toys’ and is always out and about with mates, boating, fishing, surfing amongst other things. His outgoing personality and openness have led him to have a satisfying social life. Richard is open to meeting new people and doing new activities.

He also takes an interest in the lives of others. He is close with his mates, and wants to know what they are doing and how they are feeling. He feels there is a sense of reciprocity: by taking an interest in others’ lives, he feels they also take an interest in his life. Richard’s close mates are all in a common stage of life, but more than that they are able to relate to one another.

### **Most valuable aspects of social life**

- The most important people to Richard are his wife and family (his brothers and his mum). They are the first people he wants to be around, and he considers his brothers to be his friends.
- Richard values highly the relationships he has with his brothers and close mates, especially those he plays in the band with. These relationships are characterised by openness and trust, as well as shared interests.

### **Solutions for a more fulfilled social life**

- **New member facilitator:** Richard would not require any such facilitator, but if he were a member of a club it would be highly possible that he could perform such a role. His openness and welcoming personality are characteristics which would make him ideal for this sort of role. Richard takes an interest in the lives of those around him.
- **Tools for men to plan how they would join a group:** Finding something you enjoy, and finding a means to join a club in order to meet people who have the same values and interests, is a compelling idea. Online access to clubs and groups would be the best first step in finding clubs and groups of people with similar interests, as the anonymity of the online space would make it easier.
- **Tools for men to start their own group:** This is less appealing, and joining an already existing group would perhaps be an easier option. Apprehension that there would be leadership expectations of those who start groups would be a barrier to starting a group.

## Case Study – Loose Connector Segment

*This segment is socially active however they appear to be stressed about maintaining a 'good' social life. They are very active in meeting new people and initiating new friendships but do not appear to be as focused on maintaining existing friendships. Relationships tend to be in the form of acquaintances rather than close friends and there are some barriers to opening up emotionally.*

### Introducing Sunny

Sunny is 37, married with three young children. A motor mechanic, he is the only bread winner. While money is tight, he and his wife are good budgeters and see themselves as doing better than many other families they know. They have also just bought a house in a new estate, a great source of pride for the family.

A Sri Lankan national, Sunny moved to Australia three years ago on a skilled migration visa with the firm intention to secure a better future for his children. He is reasonably well connected with the Sri Lankan community: a couple of men he knew before moving helped him find accommodation as well as a job. In fact, he recently moved to be closer to the Sri Lankan community and make sure that his wife (and himself) have the community support that they need should anything happen.

### Satisfaction with his social life

Sunny's social life has been altered drastically since getting married and even more so since becoming a father. He now finds himself working very hard to support his family, and when not working he feels compelled to spend time with his wife and kids. This is partly borne out of a desire to spend time with them but also a sense of duty: his wife spends most her days alone with the kids and she makes it clear that she wants to see him getting involved in the education of his children when not working.

*"I'm worried because my wife always attends to the kids. When I don't work, I need to spend time with her and help her. She's quite stressed."*

While Sunny has fond memories of his social life before marriage and kids, he is more circumspect about it now. While he would like to spend more time with friends, he feels he is simply not able to.

*"It's not that I don't want to see my friends. It's just that I can't... I don't have time for community or social involvement."*

His free time is now consumed with family activities. This includes shopping, going to recreation areas, visiting their local Buddhist temple and attending school events e.g. fetes and community work like cleaning up the playground. As satisfying as these activities are, he feels that he is missing out on more 'fun'; but most importantly, he feels that he now has no outlet for his problems, whether they are work or family related.

*"My wife has never worked. She can't understand my problems at work, the stress. Only my friends can understand."*



*“My wife had problems with my mother when she was staying at our place. And my mother had problems with my wife. They could come to me at different times and complain and it’s true there was no one I could talk about that.”*

Sunny does have a couple of closer male friends he already knew from Sri Lanka. But both are also busy fathers with very little time to spend alone with Sunny. One of them was his work colleague – which was handy – but he decided to change job. This made Sunny feel even more disconnected, all the more so because he never shied away from sharing personal topics with him.

*“On a deserted island, I would take my friend who welcomed me at his place for a month when I moved to Australia and my colleague who just left. We used to do lots of things together [...] for example when one was interested in a girl, we all went to her place with an excuse and distract the father so that he could talk to the girl.”*

While personal conversations with male friends are rare, Sunny doesn't shy away from them. These seem to be triggered by Sunny making a point of noticing his friends feeling anxious or unwell and simply asking whether they are alright.

*“At work, I noticed one of the guys was always on his mobile phone and he was in a bad mood. So I asked him if he was alright and that’s when he told me about the problems with his wife and his family.”*

On the positive side, family activities have helped Sunny meet other parents. However, these connections are rather 'loose' and provide little in terms of emotional support. Most discussions feel rather shallow and approaching personal topics is simply impossible.

*“I’ve met a lot of other parents at the temple and at school. But we only see them there.”*

*“I know a few other neighbours now. We say hello and ask each other about our day and that’s nice [...] No, we don’t really go to each other’s house.”*

Sunny sits on the introverted end of the spectrum, describing himself as “a little shy”. While he likes to get involved with other people, he finds it hard to approach them. When in a group, he will usually not

*If we go to the pub or go-karting with work, I don’t talk much, especially if we meet people I don’t know.”*

talk much, especially if he doesn't know them. In fact, the overwhelming feeling during a first encounter is that of inadequacy – Sunny prefers to first observe others and then adapt his speech rather than impose himself.

This makes it difficult to enlarge his social circles in a meaningful way.

In the end, it seems that if Sunny multiplies loose rather than close connections, this is as much because of his lack of time for personal relationships as it is a result of having a family and a job. This has both a short term impact on his life satisfaction (not being able to share the burden of being a

family provider) and a long term impact (not setting him up for close relationships once his children grow up or his wife disappears).

**Solutions for a more fulfilled social life**

- It seems difficult to help Sunny at this stage. Unless he is able to free himself up from work and family duties, he will always struggle to forge and sustain deep and meaningful relationships.

## Case Study – Social Striver Segment

*This segment has low satisfaction with their social connections. They find it difficult to initiate and maintain friendships; unlike the Detrimentially Disengaged segment, they want to be able to change this and achieve a richer social life, but aren't sure how to do so. They are more likely to be affected by health and financial barriers.*

### Introducing Len

Len is 63, married and has no children. Suffering from chronic fatigue, he has not been in employment for more than 12 years. He worked for the Victorian Government for 28 years before being made redundant and taking on a string of lower paid jobs including helping in a bottle shop, a fish and chips restaurant, with house painting and with maintenance in a primary school. While not well off, he still lives relatively comfortably – house owner, regular interstate holidays... and although he doesn't work, money is not a major issue.

Len grew up in the country and, since moving to Geelong 18 years ago, sees himself fitting really well in the local community: he takes part in his local neighbourhood house's activities and keeps abreast of local news through the Geelong council website and newsletter.

### Satisfaction with his social life

At a top level, Len is pretty satisfied with his social life. Although he is retired, he is very busy and feels it would be hard to fit in much more. This is especially true at the moment, as Len has to care for ageing parents in Port Fairy and he finds himself driving back and forth at least every two weeks. He is also very close to his wife, the former having always supported him over the years, even in delicate situations. He even finds himself gaining self-confidence as time goes by.

*"I've always been fairly constantly comfortable with my social life. Even with chronic fatigue that can make people feel really depressed, I've never been really bad. I don't worry about the future or what I can't do tomorrow."*

*"I used to be really quiet and shy... but now I'd talk to anybody."*

However, further discussions reveal some cracks... A few life events in particular have made it hard to maintain friendships and to conduct a fulfilled social life. His redundancy had the effect of cutting him off from colleagues: these tend to have their own busy lives outside of work and although he does bump into them from time to time, he hasn't been able to keep in touch in a meaningful way. A cancer diagnosis a few years ago had the effect of further keeping him away from existing friends. Len claims that most people are uncomfortable with illness and did not know how to treat him after he announced his diagnosis.

*"After I left work, nobody called me. People go into their shells. They're too busy in their own little worlds."*

*“After I told him about my diagnosis, a mate asked me ‘so how do I treat you?’ and when I told him ‘just as usual’ he was surprised and said ‘good, I was worried about how to handle you.’”*

Finally, Len is not helped by health issues, whether it is recurring non-invasive cancer (taking a lot of his time and energy), chronic fatigue (meaning he cannot travel very far or make plans) or food allergies (causing him to refuse some social outings if his dietary requirements cannot be accommodated).

*“I’ve had health problems since the age of 14. Whether it’s chronic fatigue, cancer or food allergies, it takes away from your ability to respond to invites and all...”*

Len now mainly keeps to his wife with only occasional chats with neighbours and other community members. When asked about the people he would want to discuss an emotional issue with or he would take to a desert island, Len struggles to think of anyone beyond his wife. This makes him very vulnerable to further social isolation should anything happen to his wife.

*“I would take my wife with me: she had to endure a hard life with me, she stood by me. I can’t really think of anyone else. [...] Maybe an old mate I can’t see anymore because his new partner doesn’t want him to have anything to do with his old life.”*

### **Solutions for a more fulfilled social life**

Len only recently joined a newly created Men's Shed in his area. He came across it randomly and the impact has been largely positive: Len enjoys planning and carrying out activities with other men his age e.g. repairing the local school's outdoor furniture or applying for funding with the council, but also organising social events outside these activities such as a night out at the restaurant where wives are invited. In fact, wives now push their husbands to organise more of these.

It also seems partners have a pivotal role to play in helping men to socialise. This includes:

- Allowing for autonomy: giving their partners enough 'man time' and not questioning their relationships with their friends. Men are yearning for their 'men nights out'. Is it time for a 'Man Time' campaign?
- Encouraging men to engage in new activities: most men joining the Geelong shed seem to have been pushed by their wives who "had enough of seeing them roaming aimlessly around the house". In fact, women seem to be better connected and either know about these clubs or have the capacity to research them.

Social skills are also important to help sustain relationships. Len would have felt a lot less isolated if his friends had been better equipped to show support following his cancer diagnosis. Social skills 'courses' could also teach men to notice when others aren't feeling well and to let them know that they have noticed.

Clubs seem to be already well advertised e.g. most councils have a community directory. But to those who are less connected, a central directory could be beneficial. This would also have the benefit to shed light on the issue of social isolation and encourage action.

What wouldn't work/be unnecessary:

- Even if not formalised, clubs already seem to have a process in place to welcome new members e.g. new members are welcomed by the secretary at Len's Men's Shed.
- Tools to start a group: while it seems like a great idea, it needs to be assessed whether isolated men at the introverted end of the spectrum, who already have issues *joining* a group, would be proactive at creating one. Len certainly wouldn't.

## Case Study – Whateverer Segment

The closest to the average level of social connectedness; they have no real emotional, financial, time or health barriers. However, while they see some value in having a rich social life, it is not a priority for them; they tend to relate less to social connections outside of family and work.

### Introducing Steve

Steve is 34 years old, he is a university graduate with a mid-high income job, he is single, has no children, and lives with his mother in a metro location.

*“I’m pretty easy-going”*

Steve is very focussed on his work; it seems to be the major (perhaps only) source of his sense of self-worth. However, he does find it stressful, and cites the demanding nature of his job as a reason for not being able to socialize. At the end of a long work day he needs “me” time, which for Steve means relaxing at home, listening to music, watching TV, movies and sports.

### Satisfaction with his social life

Making this video diary prompted Steve to engage in some self-reflection; he stated that prior to this exercise he hadn’t really “given his social life much thought”.

Steve indicates that he is willing to socialise, although this does not happen too frequently, as he finds that he is often tired and lacking in energy after work, meaning that he would rather just go home than seek out social activities.

*“After work makes it a little bit more difficult, you’re kind of tired after the full work day, so I kind of just want to go home and don’t want to socialise with anybody. Look it’s difficult, if you spend a full day at work, you’re just too tired to socialize or do anything about that so... it’s a blocker but I guess I try to make up for it over the weekends.”*

Steve admits that it would be nice to have more social interactions, but finds this difficult to organise. For various reasons, he has found that he has progressively lost touch with his school mates.

*“It would be nice to have more [time with friends], but everyone’s busy...I’ve been the instigator of catch-ups before, but it’s a hassle.”*

Steve is aware that he has an issue with confidence, and this negatively impacts on his social life.

*“If you haven’t got confidence, there’s not much you can do”*

### Most valuable aspects of social life

His social life isn't active, and he doesn't have a wide circle of friends; rather, he has a wider circle of more casual acquaintances, which act as his social life.

*"I don't have a wide cast of friends but the friends that I do have, we're reasonably close. I wouldn't say close-close, but enough to take a keen interest on both ends."*

### Solutions for a more fulfilled social life

- He sees social media to be superficial, and not a way to connect with people.
- Steve should make the effort to reconnect with his school friends – these are people he still gets along well with, but has just fallen out of contact with. Steve might need to have a reason to catch up with old friends or some tools to become more confident taking the first step to get in touch.

Sharing a common interest with people is a vital aspect of Steve's social life, especially moving forward. He used to play tennis with university friends, and expressed some interest in joining a tennis club. He could also use playing tennis as an "excuse" to get together with friends he has not seen in a while (shared activity taking the pressure off the social interaction).

## 7.3 Knowledge Audit

### Scope of work

This knowledge audit was designed to be a tightly focused review of the relevant academic and grey literature, with the goal being to inform our overall thinking, the design of our research tools and our sampling approach. Therefore the scope of the work focused on papers/reports with reviews of programs, projects, and strategies. Although “men in their middle years” is our target group, we have also reviewed programs directed at women, the general population, and other age groups to explore underlying themes and identify gaps in programs targeting men.

For the purposes of this review, social connectedness has been defined as “being satisfied with the quality and level of one’s social interaction with family, friends and the wider community”. It is also necessary to clarify that “social connectedness” is distinct from the topic of “social exclusion or isolation”. Social exclusion is not necessarily about personal relationships, but has more to do with access to public services and considerations of sufficient income, and generally used as a policy term. However, we note that some of the literature does use these terms interchangeably, and this has been considered in our review.

### Introduction

Social connectedness incorporates the intimate relationships between romantic partners, close family and confidants, as well as the less intense relationships between friends or members of a broader social network, including those that occur through participation in recreational and community activities. The strength of an individual’s social connectedness is indicated by the number and quality of relationships across these spheres (Davidson, 2013). Empirical research indicates that social connectedness can be conceptualised as comprising three independent domains (Davidson, 2013; Teo et al, 2013; Blazer 1980<sup>21</sup>; Duncan-Jones et al, 1981<sup>22</sup>):

1. **Attachment Relationships** – indicates the availability of close relationships, e.g. spouse, children, siblings
2. **Integration** – indicates the degree to which an individual is immersed in a social network and the broader community
3. **Perceptions** – indicates an individual’s subjective appraisal of the adequacy of their social connectedness

The latter, which measures people’s perceptions of whether they have somebody they can talk to about things that matter to them, has been shown to be most strongly correlated with mental health issues.

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<sup>21</sup>Blazer DG: Social support and mortality in an elderly community population. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina; 1980.

<sup>22</sup>Duncan-Jones P: The structure of social relationships: Analysis of a survey instrument. *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology* 1981a, 16(2):55-61.



We also found the “5 Dimensions of Social Connectedness” put forth by Van Bel et. al. (2008)<sup>23</sup> to be useful in clarifying the emotions and actions relating to social connectedness.

1. **Relationship saliency** – the prominence of the relationship in one’s mind, which is the outcome of thinking of another person or being aware of him/her.
2. **Closeness** – the experience of feeling close to another. This does not relate to physical proximity, but rather to the social presence in one’s mind.
3. **Contact quality** – the perceived quality of social contact with another person.
4. **Knowing each other’s experiences** – being aware of each other’s experience, both in terms of subjective experiences (e.g. love, enjoyment, sadness), as well as awareness of things that happen in one’s life.
5. **Shared understanding** – having a similar view on the world. Having similar opinions and being on the same wavelength.

Depression is a highly prevalent and disabling condition and, in Australia, represents the greatest single burden of any non-fatal disease (Mathers et al, 2000)<sup>24</sup>. People with depression suffer significant psychological distress, experience impairment across all aspects of their lives and are at increased risk of suicide (Harris & Barraclough, 1997<sup>25</sup>; Patton et. al. 2010<sup>26</sup>).

A considerable body of research indicates that social connectedness is a protective factor against depression (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001)<sup>27</sup>. People with higher levels of social connectedness are less likely to develop depression and, if they do develop depression, they are less likely to experience persistent and recurrent episodes (Davidson, 2013<sup>28</sup>; Teo et al). This research suggests that strengthening social connectedness among men in their middle years may reduce the incidence of depression which, in turn, may reduce the risk of suicide. Although current research has identified social isolation and disconnection as a risk factor for depression, this has not yet formally developed into programs that treat increasing social connectedness as a suicide prevention strategy.

There is evidence that men’s social networks shrink in correlation with specific life events such as getting married, entering the workforce and having children. Men can become dependent on a female partner for emotional support and evidence shows that marriage tends to protect against loneliness, so the breakdown of important relationships puts men at particular at risk of suffering from social

<sup>23</sup> Van Bel, D.T., Smolders, K., Ijsselsteijn, W.A., & De Kort, Y. (2009). Social connectedness: concept and measurement. *Intelligent Environments* (67-74).

<sup>24</sup>Mathers CD, Vos ET, Stevenson CE, Begg SJ: The Australian Burden of Disease Study: Measuring the loss of health from diseases, injuries and risk factors. *Medical Journal of Australia* 2000, 172(12):592-596.

<sup>25</sup>Harris EC, Barraclough B: Suicide as an outcome for mental disorders: A meta-analysis. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 1997, 170:205-228.

<sup>26</sup>Patton GC, Coffey C, Posterino M, Carlin JB, Bowes G: Life events and early onset depression: cause or consequence? *Psychological Medicine* 2003, 33(7):1203-1210.

<sup>27</sup>Kawachi I, Berkman LF: Social ties and mental health. *Journal of Urban Health* 2001, 78(3):458-467.

<sup>28</sup>Davidson SK: Social Connectedness and its association with depression outcome among primary care patients. Dissertation Melbourne: University of Melbourne; 2013.

isolation (Patton, Posterina et al, 2003)<sup>29</sup>. The effects of social disconnection are also physical; “The lack of social relationships constitutes a major risk factor for health and mortality, rivalling the effects of risk factors such as cigarette smoking, blood pressure, blood lipids, obesity and physical inactivity” (in Wyllie et al. 2012 p. 30)<sup>30</sup>.

Whilst there is extensive epidemiological evidence demonstrating an association between social connectedness and mental health, the translation of this evidence into interventions is very limited. The purpose of this study is to review the published and the grey literature to identify the range and effectiveness of existing interventions aimed at increasing social connectedness.

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<sup>29</sup>Patton GC, Coffey C, Posterino M, Carlin JB, Bowes G: Life events and early onset depression: cause or consequence? *Psychological Medicine* 2003, 33(7):1203-1210.

<sup>30</sup> Wyllie, C., Platt, S., Brownlie, J., Chandler, A., Connolly, S., Evans, R., Kennelly, B., Kirtley, O., Moore, G., O'Connor, R., Scourfield, J. (2012), *Men, Suicide and Society: Why disadvantaged men in mid-life die by suicide*. Samaritans UK Research Report.

**Knowledge Reviewed**

We have reviewed a broad body of knowledge on the topic of social connectedness (see reference list), and have chosen these sources to look at more closely. These reports and studies focus on *evaluating* programs which deal with specific interventions, as opposed to covering general approaches and strategies. The insights from the broader references have been included in the key findings below.

Reference	What is the study about?	Formal Eval? Y/N	Outcomes of Intervention	Key Learnings	Relevance to our study
<b>National Seniors Australia Productive Ageing Centre (2011). <i>Growing Plants, Growing People.</i></b>	Volunteer programs for older adults (50-70) at a community botanical garden. Targeted at recent retirees (constitutes 70% of participants). Volunteers were self-selecting.	Y – Qual& Quant data collected: focus groups, depth interviews and a self-administered questionnaire <b>EFFECTIVE</b>	Extremely high level of satisfaction with the volunteer program: 95% either ‘Satisfied’ or ‘Very Satisfied’. Very likely to recommend to others. <u>Benefits Gained Survey:</u> (scores out of 5, how much they felt they gained each benefit from the program): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Meeting people and socializing” (4.2 out of 5)</li> <li>• “Challenging myself to do new or different things” (mental stimulation) (4.1)</li> <li>• “Improving my general health and emotional wellbeing” (3.9)</li> <li>• “Making a contribution to a good cause” (4.4)</li> </ul> The focus group showed a wide range of benefits relating to social connectedness (e.g. meeting new friends, staying in closer contact with old friends, feeling a sense of belonging). Participants who were new to the area had higher satisfaction levels and dependence on the program for social needs.	Volunteering at a botanical garden gives people a sense of pride, enhances self-esteem, facilitates social interaction, and encourages participation in new activities. Volunteers were able to form strong bonds with other volunteers based on their mutual “love of garden”. Social benefits arise from the sharing of knowledge and skills. The beautiful, natural environment was a critical factor in the success of the program: there are proven positive effects of being out in nature on mental health (known as the “biofillia hypothesis”). Good idea to target people who have recently moved to a community for volunteer programs like this (strong relationship between volunteering and sense of place).	Volunteer programs are an effective way to reach socially disconnected people and make them feel useful and connected to the community. When targeting volunteering programs for socially disconnected men in their middle age, it is vital to combine interest with volunteering – make sure the volunteering program is something they are already interested in, or where they can utilize existing skills. <b>Pillars Used: 4/5</b> 1. Unobtrusive, “Hidden Therapy” 3. Purpose-driven 4. Immediate start and ongoing support 5. Informal, appealing environment
<b>B. Golding, A. Foley, M. Brown &amp; J. Harvey by E. Skladzien &amp; S. O’Dwyer (2010).</b>	Men 50+ learning through hands-on training in programs at community centres, including sporting	Y – Survey and focus groups <b>EFFECTIVE</b>	The men surveyed felt the learning/training programs were a way to meet new friends, keep them healthy, give back to the community, learn new skills and reinforce their masculinity. 89% of participants reported an improvement in their overall wellbeing	Learning in later life should not just be limited to traditional education and training settings. Needs are best met in an informal, social, unstructured setting.	Men’s wellbeing and sense of identity are often closely associated with their work, so providing men with a way to continue working/learning/teaching is

<p><b>Making good connections: How community participation enriches learning, wellbeing and a sense of identity in older men.</b> (Report based on a 2009 NSPAC study)</p>	<p>groups, fire and emergency stations, and hobby clubs. Targeted men who had recently experienced a number of changes in their lives (retirement, health problems, loss of a spouse).</p>		<p>89% Felt more accepted in their community 77% Felt that their social skills had improved 70% saw the program as a way to get them out of the house 91% indicated that being part of their organization helped them to learn 94% were keen to learn more “We are coming into retirement... and if I didn’t have that [the Anglers Club] to fall back on, life would be pretty empty at present” (p.18).</p>	<p>The programs were most effective for those men who were “active participants” and felt they had an informal leadership role. Framing the program around learning as opposed to “treatment” makes it accessible to middle-aged men (hands-on learning). The programs should be targeted specifically at men, allowing them to participate in “masculine” activities they are interested in. In terms of generalizability, it would be good to know how these participants were recruited. This issue of recruitment into the programs is important as it relates to how people are targeted / screened for risk.</p>	<p>extremely valuable. Allows them to participate in a non-threatening socially engaging activity that isn’t about “treatment” (hides the therapeutic process). This study is particularly relevant, as it measures important social connectedness concepts such as feelings of belonging, social skills and getting people out of the house and interacting with others. Need to explore further how participants are recruited and screened for risk. Possible issues with implementation: this type of program seems to be best suited to smaller towns/communities, would it work in an urban setting? <b>Pillars Used: 5/5</b> 1. Unobtrusive, “Hidden Therapy” 2. Peer-led 3. Purpose-driven 4. Immediate start and ongoing support 5. Informal, appealing environment</p>
<p><b>Pringle, A., Zwolinsky, S., McKenna J., Daly-Smith A., Robertson S., White, A. (2013). Effect of a national</b></p>	<p>National program of men’s health delivered in/by English Premier League (EPL) football clubs. Interventions included educational activities on match days and weekly lifestyle classes at the football</p>	<p>Y – Pre and post intervention, men completed validated self-report measures for</p>	<p>The program was successful in reaching men who were high-risk and not involved in traditional health programs. Positive changes were noted across a wide range of health behaviours, including a 66% increase in physical activity, a 25% decrease in time spent sitting down, a 12.5% decrease in the consumption of alcohol, and an 8.8% decrease in BMI.</p>	<p>This program was particularly useful in reaching men who did not see themselves as having any health problems. The focus of this study is primarily on physical wellbeing, but the emotional and social benefits (including reducing social isolation) was a secondary outcome. Sport is a great way to reach men who would otherwise not go to see a healthcare professional.</p>	<p>Sport is an effective way to target men who wouldn’t normally engage in traditional health programs; it removes the social stigma as their involvement is primarily based on their identity as a supporter of the football club. Ideal way to reach out to a younger demographic (under 50s).</p>

<p>programme of men’s health delivered in English Premier League football clubs. <i>Public Health</i> 127, 18-26.</p>	<p>stadiums. Targeted towards male EPL supporters with high health risks: hard-to-engage men who were not using primary care and health info services.</p>	<p>health behaviours. <b>MODERATELY EFFECTIVE</b></p>			<p>Important to consider programs that are not expressly targeted at improving social connectedness, as it can be a direct result of improvements in other areas (health and fitness) <b>Pillars Used: 3/5</b> 1. Unobtrusive, “Hidden Therapy” 3. Purpose-driven 5. Informal, appealing environment</p>
<p>Osborne, K., Patel, K. (2013) Evaluation of a website that promotes social connectedness: lessons for equitable e-health promotion. <i>Aust J Prim Health</i> 19(4), 325-30.</p>	<p>Website <i>AroundYou</i> which aims to promote health by fostering social connectedness: provides info to connect people to locally-based community events across Australia. Non-targeted approach, general population health-promotion strategy.</p>	<p>Y – Analysis of the use of <i>AroundYou</i> website by postcode (number of page visits/ click-thrus per 10,000 population) <b>NOT EFFECTIVE</b></p>	<p>Usage of the website <i>AroundYou</i> was not equally distributed, with more events being listed and viewed in wealthy areas. 4000 page views of <i>AroundYou</i> per 10,000 population in “highly accessible” areas, as compared to between 1000-1400 page views per 10,000 population in “accessible”, “moderately accessible”, “remote”, and “very remote” areas. Both low-income and rural areas had much lower usage of the website. While there is a higher rate of internet usage in wealthier areas, the high disparity between page views in wealthy/highly accessible areas indicates that the issue goes much deeper than just ability to access the website. Population groups and geographic areas that are socially disadvantaged (and are likely to be most in need of social connectedness) were the least likely to access and use the online information.</p>	<p>Programs (both online and not) that are not targeted will generally reach those who need them the least. To be effective, a rifle approach, not a shotgun approach, should be taken. For every program/intervention strategy, there needs to be a consideration of the specific needs of the individuals targeted. Online programs that are not specifically targeted towards reaching socially disconnected men in their middle ages may have limited utility.</p>	<p>When using online programs, must be tailored and targeted specifically to the group we’re trying to reach (socially disconnected men 30-65). Programs that are not targeted (general health-promotion) will generally be used the most by the groups who need them the least. In lots of e-health programs the majority of people go to the first page of the program and then don’t move onto the second. Thus, it has lots of hits but very few completers of the program. If they don’t complete it, it is unlikely to be effective. <b>Pillars Used: 2/5</b> 1. Unobtrusive, “Hidden Therapy” 5. Informal, appealing environment</p>
<p>Visser, T., Vastenburg, M. H., Keyson D. V. (2011). Designing to Support Social</p>	<p>Participants in pairs with existing relationships (friends or family members) used a <i>SnowGlobe</i> over several weeks. 12 participants between 42-84.</p>	<p>Y – Longitudinal field study. Depth interviews with participants at</p>	<p>Generally, participants enjoyed using their <i>SnowGlobe</i>; it contributed to relationship saliency and closeness (as dimensions of social connectedness). Made them feel that the other person was “there with them” in an ambiguous, unobtrusive way. The <i>SnowGlobe</i> gave the users a sense of constant closeness with the other person, without the need to actively seek out connection (phone call, visit, etc.)</p>	<p>All about building stronger connection with existing relationship. Key design aspects that contributed to the positive social effects for users were the low-bandwidth level of communication, the ambiguity of the interaction, and the physicality of the interactions.</p>	<p>Ambiguous, unobtrusive social interaction – constant contact. Great for introverted men who are struggling to reach out to others, as they can feel a constant sense of “togetherness” with another person</p>

<p><b>Connectedness:</b> <b>The Case of SnowGlobe.</b> <i>International Journal of Design 5(3).</i></p>	<p>“SnowGlobe is a lamp that creates interpersonal awareness of movement between people in two remote living rooms. It displays movement of a remote user by glowing brighter, and users can exchange nudges by shaking their SnowGlobes”</p>	<p>the end of the trial. <b>EFFECTIVE</b></p>	<p>Knowing that someone else was aware of their movements encouraged the participants to be more active around their home. All participants expressed an increased awareness of the other person (relationship saliency). 8 out of 12 participants reported increased feelings of social presence – of feeling that the other person was there with them. “[In the morning] I like to see that she’s there. I know that she’s having breakfast too, so we’re having it together, which is really nice!” (Senior, Couple 6). Increased frequency of contact: use of the SnowGlobe caused the pairs to call or visit each other more often.</p>	<p>This intervention is about increasing the quality of existing relationships as opposed to creating new ones. Ideal for introverted people, as the ambiguity of the display doesn’t broadcast what the person is doing, just that they are there. Could also be valuable for couples and families who are separated from each other for work – Fly In Fly Out workers.</p>	<p>without the need to actively seek out connections. Implementation issues: obviously, this program would only be appropriate for people who have a friend or family member they are close with already. Applications for FIFO workers? <b>Pillars Used: 2/5</b> 1. Unobtrusive, “Hidden Therapy” 5. Informal, appealing environment</p>
<p><b>Cosson, B., Graham, E. (2012) “I felt like a third wheel”:</b> <i> fathers’ stories of exclusion from the ‘parenting team’.</i> <b>Journal of Family Studies 18(2-3) p.121-129.</b></p>	<p>Community-based Parenting Support Programs (Tweddle Child and Family Services)</p>	<p>Y – 5 Focus groups (27 fathers) <b>NOT EFFECTIVE</b></p>	<p>Fathers reported some negative experiences at Parent Support Services, where their wives were the focus of the instructor’s attention (“Maternal Gatekeeping”) and they were treated as secondary or part-time parents. In family services programs, as well as with doctors and the general community, the respondents felt their contribution to childcare was marginalized and not valued. Engaging in a peer-led, social fathers’ group would be beneficial to men’s engagement with their families and their social lives.</p>	<p>Men should be encouraged to attend Fathers’ Groups with their new babies, in addition to parenting groups with their wives where they are often treated as a ‘secondary parent’. The informal, peer-to-peer format of Dads’ Groups would allow them to take ownership of the process of learning to be a Dad, to help one another instead of being taught by an instructor, and also to widen their social circle to other men at a similar life stage. This will help to prevent the social isolation that often occurs following the birth of a first child. (Preventative Measure) e.g. Beer and Bubs</p>	<p>Identifies a need for fathers’ groups as a complement to parenting support programs, with male leaders or maybe just peer to peer. This is an example of a program which intervenes at a critical time and is practical in terms of recruitment: increasing implementation potential. However, it may not be the best use of resources as it only targets a small number of men (first time fathers), and those who already have a partner and are about to increase their attachments through having children. Is this more of a social exclusion issue rather than social connectedness? <b>Pillars Used: 1/5</b> 3. Purpose-driven</p>
<p><b>Flowers, R &amp; McEwen, C 2003,</b> <b>The impact of re-</b></p>	<p>“The Torch Project”, aimed at increasing <b>community arts participation.</b> “An</p>	<p><b>N EFFECTIVE</b></p>	<p>Informal, anecdotal evaluation indicates promising outcomes: -Increased community identity and engagement -Improved quality of life -Reduced social isolation</p>	<p>Community arts projects allow participants to establish or re-establish their sense of identity through the process of expressing their creativity.</p>	<p>As many of the intervention strategies target the “typical Aussie male”, it would be useful to include programs that would appeal to males</p>

<p><b>igniting community and ‘The Torch’ on community capacity building, Centre for Population Education, University of Technology, Sydney.</b></p>	<p>extensive program of community cultural development work in regional and metropolitan Victoria”. Aimed at a wide variety of social groups, including at-risk individuals.</p>		<p>-Improved recreational options -Strengthening of capacities among the most disadvantaged</p>	<p>Participants are often able to gain public recognition, be it for a painting in a visual arts exhibition, or participating in a play. This can be particularly beneficial for participants who have low self-esteem (the challenge being to get these people to participate in the first place!)</p>	<p>with a wider range of interests (as not all middle aged men love sports!), as well as homosexual, bisexual and transgender males. <b>Pillars Used: 5/5</b> 1. Unobtrusive, “Hidden Therapy” 2. Peer-led 3. Purpose-driven 4. Immediate start and ongoing support 5. Informal, appealing environment</p>
<p><b>Wood, L.J., Giles-Corti, B., Bulsara, M. K., Bosch, D. A. (2007). More Than a Furry Companion: The Ripple Effect of Companion Animals on Neighbourhood Interactions and Sense of Community. <i>Society and Animals</i>, 15, 43-56.</b></p>	<p>Exploring the emotional and social benefits gained from <b>owning a dog</b>. Study aimed at the general population (18+), survey and focus groups included both pet owners and non-pet owners.</p>	<p>Y – Quantitative and Qualitative. Telephone survey with 339 adult respondents, and 12 focus groups. <b>EFFECTIVE</b></p>	<p>Dog owners 57% more likely to be civically engaged than non-pet owners. Pet owners 74% more likely to have a high score in social networks and interaction than non-pet owners. Dogs increased the likelihood of their owners meeting other people within their immediate street and the wider suburb, and dog owners reported ongoing social interaction with other dog owners (on walks, at dog parks). Dog owners reported considerably lower rates of loneliness, depression and social anxiety. The odds of reporting “frequently feeling lonely” were twice as high among non-pet owners as compared to pet owners. 74.5% of pet owners “rarely or never” find it hard to get to know people, as compared to 62.6% of non-pet owners.</p>	<p>Dog ownership is an effective antidote to loneliness, not just for companionship at home, but also due to the social contact and interactions they encourage with neighbours and other members of the community. Owning a pet can offer improved social connections with neighbours and people with similar interests, which is particularly beneficial for people who are socially disconnected or live alone. Owning a dog encourages people to get outside and exercise (so benefits also come from the exercise itself). A dog acts as “social lubricant” to allow them to make new connections.</p>	<p>Owning a dog, and the activities it encourages, would provide men with ongoing social interaction with their community, as well as a regular schedule of outdoor exercise. Possible intervention strategy: a dog walking group. There are limitations to this type of study, since people who are already more social would probably be more likely to get a dog in the first place. Although the actual evidence for effectiveness is lacking, it is still a very promising intervention strategy and merits further investigation. <b>Pillars Used: 4/5</b> 1. Unobtrusive, “Hidden Therapy” 2. Peer-led 4. Immediate start and ongoing support 5. Informal, appealing environment</p>

## **Key Learnings about social connectedness interventions**

### **Pillars of Social Connectedness Interventions:**

To most effectively reach socially disconnected men, intervention strategies must be unobtrusive, peer-led, purpose-driven, able to start immediately and provide ongoing support, all in an informal, appealing environment.

#### **1. “Hidden Therapy”: Interventions and strategies need to be unobtrusive**

- The most effective strategies (especially for men) are ones that hide the therapeutic process
- Provide ‘an excuse’ to be social by engaging in an activity they are already interested in (e.g. sports, gardening, hobby club)
- Allows men to avoid the social stigma of seeking out help, being labelled as “mentally ill”
- Allows friendship to develop through shared interests/activities

#### **2. Peer-led strategies seem to have the most traction**

- Men can be suspicious of the motivation of professionals, and don't like to be seen as seeking help from an “expert”.
- They are often turned off by psycho-babble, and respond instead to relatable advice from other men who have been through the same experiences as they have.
- Peer-led interventions allow for ongoing social connection and emotional support – men form strong bonds with other men with similar backgrounds and life experiences. Provides opportunities for informal mentorships.
- Ties into the ‘hidden therapy’ principle.

#### **3. Interventions that give men a sense of purpose are the most effective.**

- This can come in the form of learning a new skill or reclaiming an old one, helping out in their community, or teaching others.
- Feeling useful can help men reclaim their sense of masculinity and confidence.
- Examples: Men's Sheds, volunteering, Nana's kitchens etc.
- Again, this ties into ‘hidden therapy’; the benefits come naturally from learning, teaching or helping, so there is no need to focus on their problems.
- “Helper Therapy Principle”



#### 4. Immediate Start and Ongoing Support

- When men do reach out for formal help, the interventions and treatment need to be enacted quickly and an ongoing program must be established.
- As men are less likely to seek treatment for mental health issues, they are often already at a crisis point when they do, so it is vital that an immediate “one-stop-shop” treatment is utilized, and that they are not just referred onto someone else.
- Ongoing support is vital, as men look for a quick fix to their problems, and can quickly give up on treatments if they feel they are not working fast enough.
- Interventions should be based in appealing, informal environments that make the men feel comfortable reconnecting and/or meeting new people.
  - E.g. gardens, Men's Sheds

#### 5. In an informal, appealing environment

- Outdoor programs seem to be particularly appealing
- Informal allows for natural, genuine connections between participants

#### Gaps in the existing research

- Divorce support groups
  - While divorce support groups for men do exist, there appears to be a lack of evaluations of outcomes.
  - This is an area where attention could be paid to the *prevention* of social disconnection, as this is very common for middle-aged men after a relationship breakdown.
- Work-based programs to reach the “Worried Well”
  - Evaluations of workplace programs are generally focused on the outcomes for productivity and job satisfaction, not necessarily on general mental wellbeing.
  - Programs in the workplace are ideal to reach men who are “married to their job”, and the mandatory nature of workplace programs removes the social stigma of asking for help.
- Community arts programs
  - While there is plenty of anecdotal evidence pointing to the positive social effects of community arts programs, there is “little rigorous evaluation of social capital as an outcome of community arts programs” (Keleher et. al. 2005<sup>31</sup>).

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<sup>31</sup>Keleher, H. & Armstrong, R. (2005). *Evidence-based mental health promotion resource*. Report for the Department of Human Services and VicHealth, Melbourne

- In the context of social connectedness, the focus should be placed on programs that are group-based and participatory, such as the performing arts, and collaborative visual arts (e.g. murals, arts festivals).
- Individualistic arts programs (such as visual arts) can be valuable for people to gain confidence and express themselves, but are less useful in the context of strengthening relationships.
- More research needs to be done into interventions aimed at strengthening or re-establishing existing relationships.
  - The majority of interventions are targeted at enabling social integration and establishing new relationships.
- Intervention strategies targeted at different personality types (e.g. introverts, extroverts)
  - The differing social needs of introverted personalities and extroverted personalities are addressed in the literature, but in a fairly broad sense, i.e. introverts need quality of relationships, extroverts need quantity as well as quality.
  - We can infer which interventions are aimed at strengthening existing relationships and which are aimed at establishing new relationships, however it would be useful to see evaluated intervention strategies that are specifically aimed at different personality types.
- The majority of programs do not have pre and post measures, so without further research it is difficult to establish whether the program actually improved social connectedness, OR whether people who were already socially connected and not at risk were more likely to join these programs in the first place.