

Wellbeing Protective Factors: Socialisation

Why social connection matters

Strong relationships are a key wellbeing protective factor. Learn how social connection improves mental health, reduces isolation, and supports shift workers.



Why social connection matters for wellbeing

We all know how good it feels to spend time with the people we love. But did you know that social connection is also a powerful wellbeing protective factor? Just like sleep, healthy eating and exercise, strong relationships help keep us in the green zone.

In this article, we look at the importance of social connection on your life and ways you can improve it, even when you work irregular hours.

Socialisation as a wellbeing protective factor

Protective factors are signs and behaviours that show us that life is in a good place. They're the habits and supports that buffer us from stress and help us recover more easily from challenges. Social connection is one of the most important.

There are many health benefits of social connection. It can lower rates of anxiety and depression, improve self-esteem and empathy. Relationships can also have physical impacts, including boosting your immune system which can help you recover from illnesses and potentially lengthen your life.

Strong social relationships can be just as important for your health as not smoking or drinking. One study found they're even more important than staying active or maintaining a healthy weight.



The impact of social isolation

Unfortunately, many Australians feel socially isolated. One survey in 2023 found 15% of Australians over 15 were experiencing social isolation. (17% of males and 13% of females). This is an increase on the 13% of Australians who noted feeling socially isolated in 2019 (during the COVID pandemic).

When you have infrequent social contact, it can have detrimental effects on your health. Social isolation is linked to mental illness, emotional distress, suicide, dementia, premature death and poor health behaviours such as smoking, physical inactivity and poor sleep. It's also been linked to biological effects like high blood pressure and lowering your immunity.

Make yourself the priority – fostering social connection means being mindful of your limits and ensuring you have time to nurture meaningful relationships. It's about recognising the importance of your connections with others and how this contributes positively to your own wellbeing.



How to improve social connection as a shift worker

For people who work shifts, maintaining social ties can be particularly challenging. Rotating rosters, night shifts and fatigue often mean missing out on regular social events or family time.

Here are some practical ways to strengthen your social wellbeing.

- **Prioritise quality over quantity** - invest in relationships that are positive, supportive and reciprocal.
- **Make it regular** - even short, consistent check-ins by phone or text make a difference.
- **Plan in advance** - if there's something important coming up, like a family wedding or friend's birthday, try to book it in your diary or arrange for a shift swap. Even if you can't be at all the social occasions, prioritise the important ones.
- **Blend activities** - combine social connection with exercise (walking with a friend, joining a class).
- **Adapt to your schedule** - shift workers can use off-peak times to enjoy quieter catch-ups, like a beach walk when others are at work or date nights on Mondays when restaurants are quieter.
- **Look for new communities** - volunteering, interest groups or online forums can help broaden your network.
- **Reach out early** - if you feel disconnected, taking the first step to connect often helps break the cycle of isolation.



Social connection isn't just a "nice-to-have." It's one of the strongest protective factors for mental and physical health. While shift work and modern life can make it harder to maintain, even small, intentional steps toward connection can make a big difference.

By building and nurturing relationships, we give ourselves one of the best chances of staying in the green zone (where life feels good), we feel stronger and better able to cope when life feels tough.



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