



mental health  
association nsw

# Mental Health Association NSW

## Research Report 1:

### Community Participation, Psychological Distress, and Mental Wellbeing in NSW

Australian and international research has long documented the connection between community participation and mental health and wellbeing <sup>(1,2)</sup>. Getting more connected and involved with others can improve self esteem, increase a sense of belonging and protect against depression and anxiety <sup>(2)</sup>. More recently, studies suggest that the relationship between community participation and mental health and wellbeing is more complex than first thought <sup>(3, 4, 5)</sup>. The research suggests that we may require more targeted strategies to promote community participation for different parts of the community e.g. busy working parents, young people, or for men and women.

The focus of Mental Health Week (MHW) NSW 2009 is 'Sign up, Link in, Get involved' <sup>(6)</sup>, which promotes the importance of participation and getting involved for mental wellbeing. The Mental Health Association NSW (MHA) is conducting research in NSW to better understand how we can effectively promote the benefits of participation to the community at large.

#### The survey

The survey was conducted between September – October 2009, and the data was analysed using a sample of 309 participants who had completed the questionnaire anonymously online via a link on the MHA website. The survey investigated community participation, use of social media, barriers to participation, social cohesion, psychological distress, happiness and socio-demographics. The following preliminary results are being released for MHW and report on our findings regarding reported patterns of community participation, psychological distress and happiness (in the last 4 weeks). The final results of the survey will be released before the end of 2009. The majority of survey respondents were women (72%), and aged between 18 – 25 years (30%). The oldest respondent was 79 years of age. 57% of respondents did not have dependents living with them and 14% owned their own home. 55% of respondents reported asking for financial help from their friends or family in the last 12 months.

#### Differences in feeling distressed or happy across the community

Amongst people who reported psychological distress (14%), only 15% felt happy "all or most of the time" in the last 4 weeks. The majority of people who did not feel distressed (76%), reported feelings of happiness (70%).

The largest age group by far reporting psychological distress was 18 – 25 year olds (62%, compared to 32% for over 25 year olds). 24% of people who asked for financial help from friends or family in the last 12 months, reported higher distress compared with 12% of people who didn't need financial assistance.

There were no significant differences in psychological distress for men (17%) and women (14%), however more women (64%) reported feeling happy than men (46%). Reported happiness did not vary by any other demographics like age, financial status, household status or relationship status.

#### What do people do the most in their community and how does it differ according to your age/gender or home ownership status?

In terms of what respondents nominated they "always" did, the most popular response was seeing members of their household each morning (59%) or during a daily main meal (47%). Next favoured was being a member of a sporting or community club (18%). 17% make time to keep in touch with their friends, and 12% talk about current affairs with others. Less frequent are visiting friends at home or at their house (6%), attending places of worship (7%), doing organised activities in the community (6%),

going to events that bring people together like fetes or shows (4%), seeing members of extended family in person (4%) or doing things with family in person (3%) and chatting with neighbours (2%).

Men and women didn't differ significantly in their patterns although women tend to see their friends all the time, and men prefer seeing their friends occasionally. People who own their own home are more likely to see their household members at the beginning of the day, eat a meal with their household members, have less time for their friends and interact more with their neighbours, than people who don't own their own home.

More older people (46 – 55 year olds) state that they often go to prayer meetings, and take part in organised group activities than any other age group. Young people chat to their neighbours the least of all age groups (16%). Almost half of people aged 18 – 25 visit their friends often, which was significantly more than all other age groups. Senior citizens see their friends the least of all age groups (37%).

### **How does participation differ according to experiences of distress and happiness?**

#### Distress/mental ill-health:

Very few people who "always" see members of their household at the start of the day or eat a meal with members of household report feelings of distress in the last 4 weeks (7-9%).

Distress was reported in 27% of people who always see members of their extended family and 27% of people who never see members of their extended family. In other words a greater number of people reported distress when seeing members of their family often or occasionally, compared to all the time or never.

There were no relationships found between distress and seeing friends, neighbours, or attending religious worship, or community activities, clubs, or being active in current affairs.

#### Mental Wellbeing/happiness:

84 - 93% of people who always make time to see their friends or visit each other, reported feeling happy, compared to only 40-45% who never or rarely see or visit their friends. 81% of people who take an active interest in current affairs are happy, compared to 17% of those who never or rarely take an interest in current affairs.

76% of people who always participate in a community based club (e.g. sporting, hobby, association) reported feeling happy, compared to only 62% of people who never or rarely participate. 73% of people who always see members of their extended family report being happy, compared to only 60% who never or rarely see members of their family. 70% of people who always eat a meal with their household members also reported feeling happy, compared with only 38% of those who never or rarely eat a main meal at home with other household members.

68% of people who reported always seeing members of their household at the start of the day, reported feeling happy, compared to 43% of people who "rarely or never see" members of their household (at the start of the day). 67% of people who always go to community events like fetes and festivals were happy, compared to only 40% of those who never or rarely go to such events.

### **What is the relationship between perceptions of participation and distress?**

Overall, 94% of people enjoyed socialising with others, and 73% enjoyed participating in their community.

In those that didn't feel they socialised enough (e.g. friends, extended family or neighbours), 21% reported distress. Only 7% who felt they socialised enough reported distress. Less distress was reported in people who felt they spend enough time participating in their community such by volunteering, being a member of a club or (7% compared to 20%).

People who were ambivalent about socialising were more likely to be distressed than those who were clear that they did or didn't enjoy it. 63% of those who are ambivalent about whether they enjoy, or do not enjoy socialising, are distressed.

## What is the relationship between perceptions of participation and happiness?

75% of those who felt they spend enough time socialising with others reported feeling happy. Only 39% of those who felt like they don't spend enough time socialising felt happy. 71% of those who felt they participate enough in their community, reported feeling happy compared to 58% who don't feel they participate enough.

People who were ambivalent about socialising were less likely to report feeling happy than those who were clear that they did or didn't enjoy it. Enjoyment of time spent in the community didn't have a relationship to happiness.

### Summary

- Indicators of mental health like “happiness” and mental ill-health such as “distress” are different concepts, that is, **you can feel unhappy without being depressed or anxious. However, most people who are distressed report feeling unhappy.** More people who report experiencing disadvantage like a financial crisis report feelings of distress. Women report feeling happier than men, but reported no differences in distress.
- **Happiness is related to spending time with friends or being a member of a club.**
- **People report feeling less distressed and happier when they see their extended family on occasion rather than all the time, or none of the time.**
- **People who are unclear about whether they enjoy socialising also report experiencing distress and lower levels of feeling happy** - “sitting on the fence” is not good for your mental health and needs to be explored further.
- More analysis of the data is required to see how personality, work-life responsibilities, social cohesion (sense of belonging, trust in others etc), structural barriers and the value attributed to participation affects the relationship between community participation and mental health. This analysis will be conducted in the next few months and released before end of 2009.
- If participating in your community fits into the rest of your life, this could be enough to contribute to mental wellbeing.
- **Psychological distress or mental ill-health is related to low levels of community participation.**
- **Happiness is related to spending time with friends or being a member of a club.**
- People in the community are isolated in different ways – **young people don't see their neighbours, older people don't see their friends that often, men aren't sure if they see their friends enough.**
- People are connected in different ways – **women see their friends a lot, older people see their neighbours often.**

## Conclusions

- **As individuals within communities, as service providers and within the public health sector in NSW, we need to :**
  - **do more to encourage people to socialise and connect with others and provide opportunities for people to participate in their community.**
  - **do more to develop life and relationship skills for people living with a mental illness in particular so that they can experience more enjoyment from socialising with others**
  - **continue to promote the importance of connecting with others for mental wellbeing and happiness**
- **Different strategies to encourage people to connect with others and participate in their community will work for different people however and we will be doing more research to specify these different pathways.**

## References:

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