

COVID-19 and its Effects on Relationships

May Survey: Have the COVID-19 restrictions affected people's relationships?

Introduction

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis has caused great societal upheaval and an unprecedented change to the way we live, work and socialise. In response, Relationships Australia is conducting a series of short surveys to explore how people's working lives, social lives and relationships have been affected by COVID-19.

May's survey is the second in this series. It investigates how people's close relationships were affected by the COVID-19 restrictions.

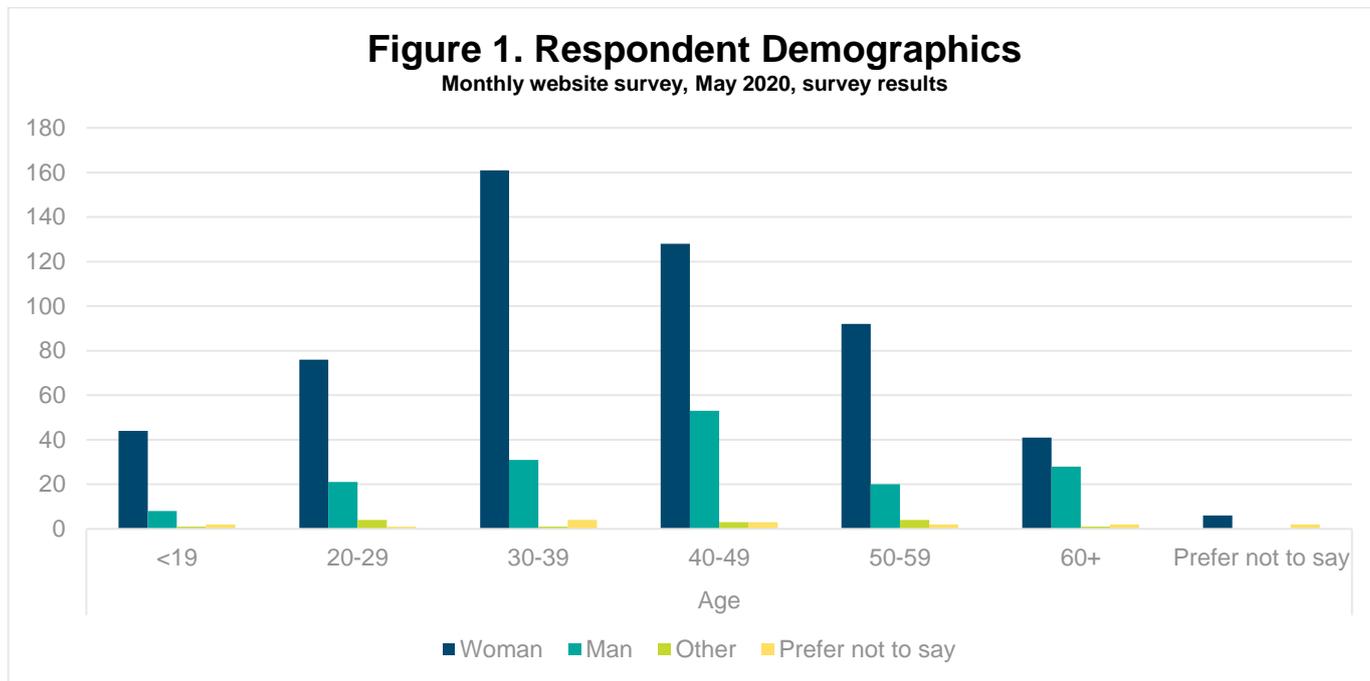
Key findings:¹

- 55 percent of people were challenged by their living arrangements during COVID-19 restrictions.
- Those who were challenged by their living arrangements were more likely to report changes to other close relationships, even with those people they did not live with.
- 20 percent of respondents who were challenged by their living arrangement still managed to create positive changes to their close relationships.
- Across all households, the majority of people (52%+) spent more time and effort maintaining relationships during COVID-19 restrictions.
- 42 percent of people experienced a negative change in their relationship with their partner.
- With parents, children, friends, extended family, neighbours and colleagues 90%+ reported no significant changes or positive changes in their relationships.
- Those who reported feeling very lonely were more likely to experience negative relationship changes throughout COVID-19. This was especially true for people's typically 'close' relationships (such as those with one's partner, children and friends), whereas people's relationships with their neighbours, extended family and colleagues were less likely to be affected.

¹ The survey questions were as follows:

1. I currently live (mostly)...
(State how strongly you agree or disagree with the following)
2. During the COVID-19 restrictions, I have sometimes felt challenged by my current living arrangements
3. During the COVID-19 restrictions, I have spent more time and effort maintaining my family relationships
4. During the COVID-19 restrictions, I have spent more time and effort maintaining my friendships
5. I often feel very lonely
(Questions in reference to people's partner, parents, children, friends, neighbours, extended family, and colleagues)
6. In the past week I have had regular face-to-face or technology-assisted contact with the following people (face-to-face contact, social media, video or phone contact, no contact and not applicable)
7. During the COVID-19 restrictions, my relationships have changed (for the better, for the worse, no change, not applicable)

Results



739 people responded to the Relationships Australia May survey, which explored changes to relationships during COVID-19 restrictions. The majority of the respondents identified as women (74%), 52 percent of those aged between 30-59 years (Figure 1). 22 percent of the respondents identified as male, 2 percent chose 'other' and a further 2 percent chose not to provide their age or gender. As for previous surveys, the demographic profile of survey respondents is consistent with our experience of the groups of people that would be accessing the Relationships Australia website.

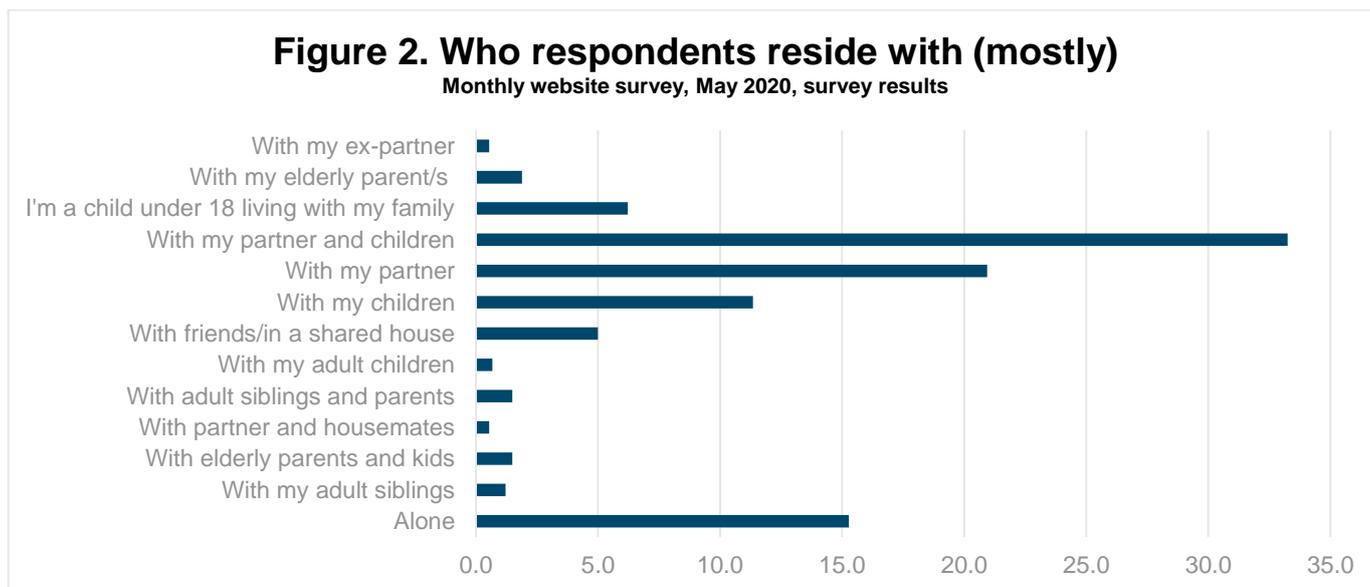
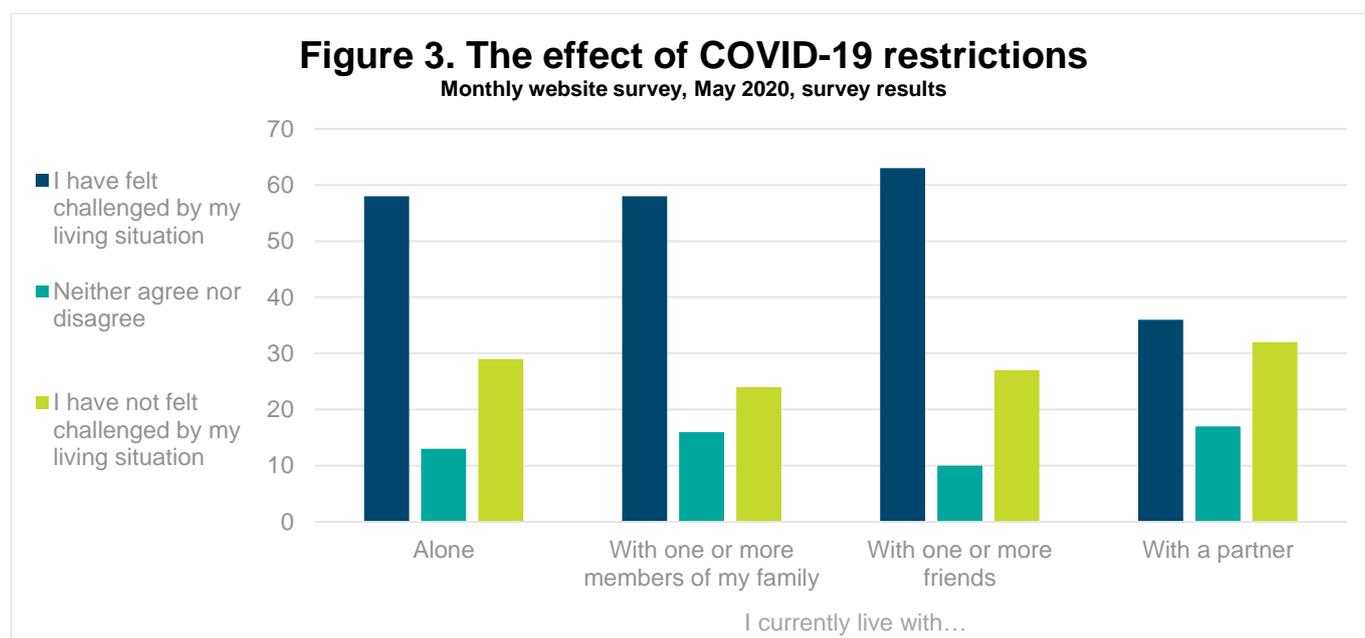


Figure 2 illustrates the living arrangements of survey respondents during the COVID-19 restrictions. Many respondents (33%) were living with their partners and family, while 21 percent lived with just their partner

and a further 15 percent were residing alone. The other 31 percent reported living in varying shared living arrangements.

Figure 3 illustrates the effect COVID-19 restrictions have had on these living arrangements (please note, we have simplified the living arrangements for ease of understanding). In these simplified figures, 15 percent of people lived alone, 59 percent with one or more family members, 6 percent with one or more friends and 25 percent with just their partner. While a majority of participants (55%) felt challenged by their living arrangements, there was little difference in this response across different living arrangements. However, all those living with an ex-partner strongly agreed that their current living arrangements throughout isolation were challenging.



In both categories (those living alone and those living with one or more members of their family) 58 percent reported finding this arrangement challenging throughout the COVID-19 restrictions. However, those living with family were more likely to feel ambivalent about the situation (16% versus 13%). Those living with one or more friends were most likely to feel challenged by the situation (63%), whereas those living with a partner (and no one else) were least likely (36%). It is well accepted that each individual's situation is different so it is difficult to account for these discrepancies, however the added challenges of teaching from home, the disproportionate of unemployment for young casual workers and the potential for loneliness when living alone may provide some explanation.

Figure 4 explores whether people have spent increased time and effort maintaining their family relationships and friendships throughout the COVID-19 restrictions. People were more likely to have spent more time and effort on their family relationships (59% agreed or strongly agreed) than their friendships (40% agreed or strongly agreed). Given the living arrangements outlined in figure 2, this suggests that in general, people are spending more time maintaining the relationships with whom they are living. As most did not live with their friends (94%), people are accustomed to putting effort into maintaining these relationships without seeing the person daily. As discussed later in this report, many respondents have experienced changes in their family relationships since the beginning of restrictions and many have felt challenged by living with their family (figure 9). Despite the challenges faced, many of these changes were for the better. As such, we can assume that the effort people have put into maintaining and growing their close relationships has had a positive effect.

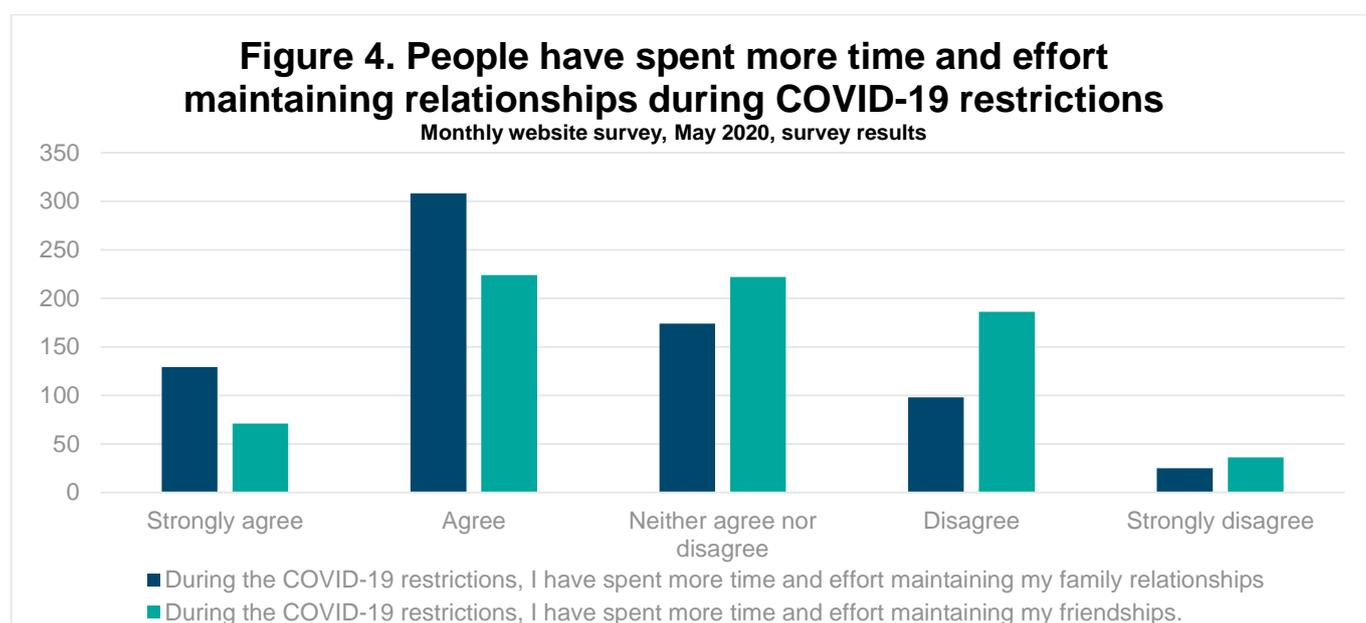


Figure 5 and 6 illustrate how time spent on maintaining relationships is affected by people’s living arrangements. Again, we have used the simplified living arrangements to analyse this data. Across all living situations, the majority of people (52%+) spent more time and effort maintaining relationships during COVID-19 restrictions. This suggests that for many, the current situation has required greater effort to sustain relationships.

While there are only minor differences between each living arrangement, those who lived alone were least likely to spend extra time maintaining family relationships (60% had spent more time versus 78%+ in other categories). This could be due to the fact that those who live alone have more experience sustaining relationships with those they do not live with, and therefore did not feel that the impact of COVID-19 required additional effort.

As expected, those who lived with their family reported a large increase in the time and effort spent on their family relationships, with 83 percent agreeing that this had been necessary. Interestingly however, those who had experienced the greatest increase in this area were respondents who lived with one or more friends. This cohort also reported the highest rate of frustration in relation to their living situation (Figure 3). As such, this increased effort could be a reflection of a desire to create connections outside of those friends/housemates whom they find challenging.

Figure 5. During COVID-19 restrictions, people have spent more time and effort maintaining family relationships

Monthly website survey, May 2020, survey results (graph does not include not applicable responses)

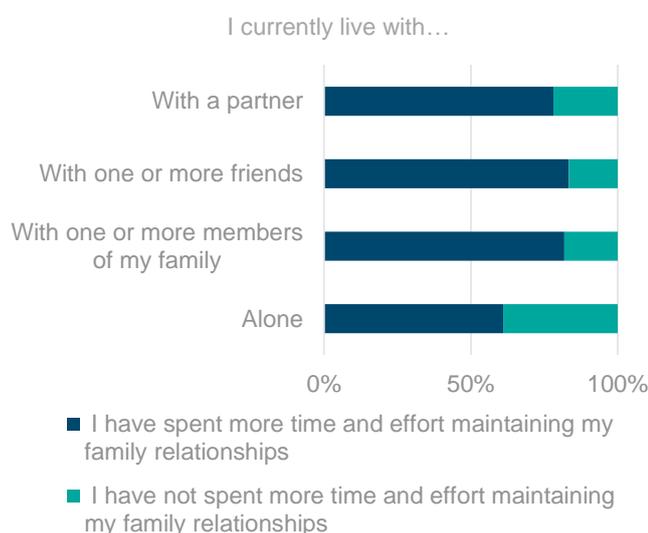


Figure 6. During COVID-19 restrictions, people have spent more time and effort maintaining friendships

Monthly website survey, May 2020, survey results (graph does not include not applicable responses)

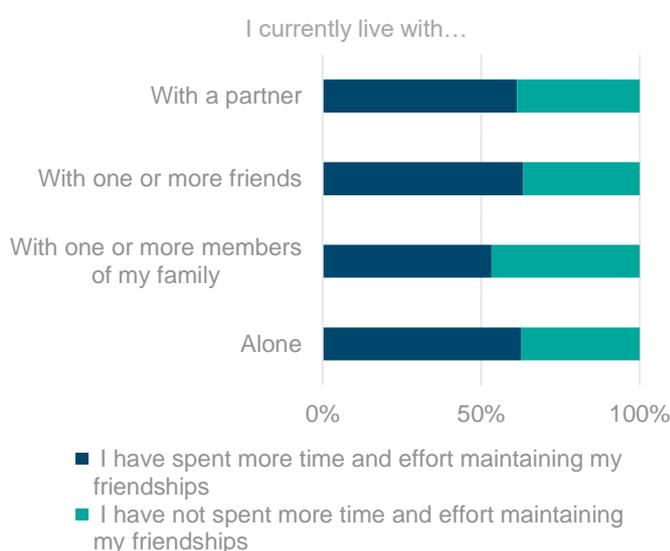


Figure 7 indicates that 42 percent of people experienced a negative change in their relationship with their partner. This is somewhat expected, given the survey is conducted on the Relationships Australia website, where many seek information on the relationship services we provide. More positively, in all other relationship categories, a strong majority (90%+) reported no significant changes or positive changes in their relationships.

The graph also suggests that typically close relationships (such as those with a partner, children or parents) were more likely to change throughout the COVID-19 restrictions, when compared with other relationships, including those with colleagues, extended family and neighbours.

Figure 7. How have people's close relationships changed since the beginning of COVID-19 restrictions?

Monthly website survey, May 2020, survey results

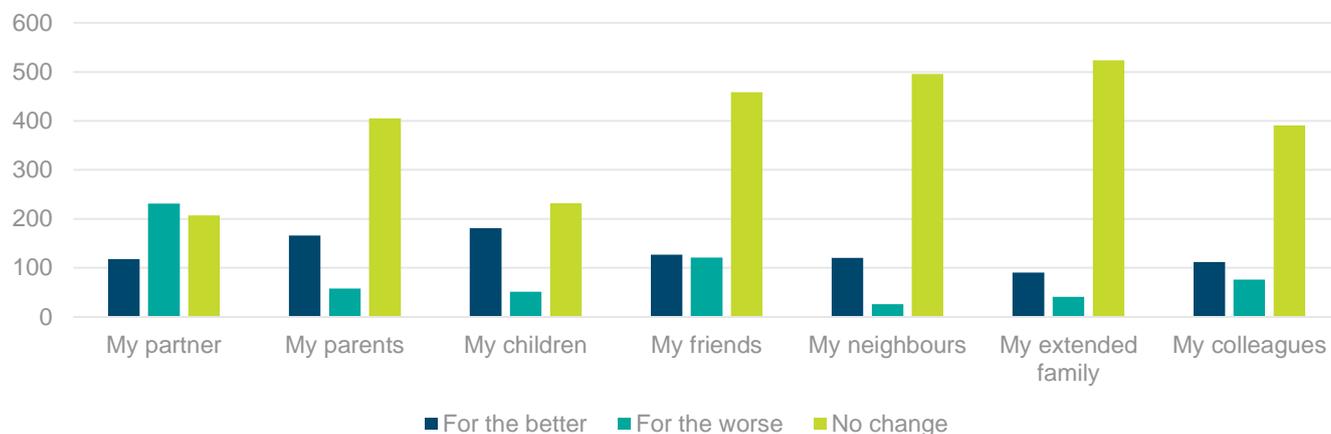


Figure 8 suggests that people who were challenged by their living situation were more likely to experience negative changes in their close relationships. This was especially true in relationships with people’s partners, parents, children and neighbours. This may suggest that additional time spent at home has put a strain on live-in relationships (or nearby in the case of neighbours).

Yet, across all relationship categories, people who were challenged by their living situation were more likely to experience negative changes regardless of whether they live with the person. For example, figure 2 demonstrates that only 33 percent of respondents live with their children and partner. Many others (36%) live alone or just with their partner, yet they still experienced negative relationship changes with non-cohabiting relations. This suggests that when people are feeling challenged by their living situation, their close relationships may suffer, regardless of whether they live together.

Figure 8. Relationships were affected by living arrangements during COVID-19 restrictions

Monthly website survey, May 2020, survey results

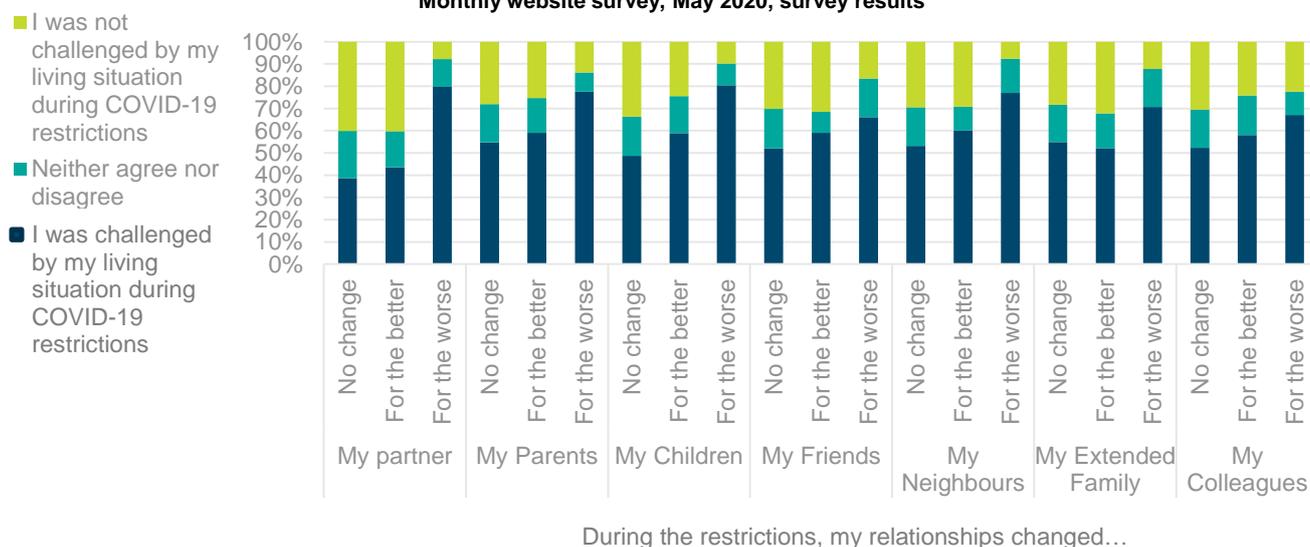


Figure 9 provides a simplified version of figure 8 by consolidating relationship categories. Figure 9 demonstrates that of those who had their relationships change 'for the better', 56 percent found their living arrangements challenging. In fact, 20 percent of respondents who were challenged by their living arrangement still managed to create positive changes to their close relationships (figure 9). This suggests that these challenges have encouraged people to learn to better manage their conflicts (with the people with whom they live and others). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and before, Relationships Australia has encouraged people to practice better communication and boundary setting, among others. Actions such as these, whilst generated in response to a challenging situation, have enabled people to create positive relationship changes during the COVID-19 restrictions, the effects of which could be long-lasting.

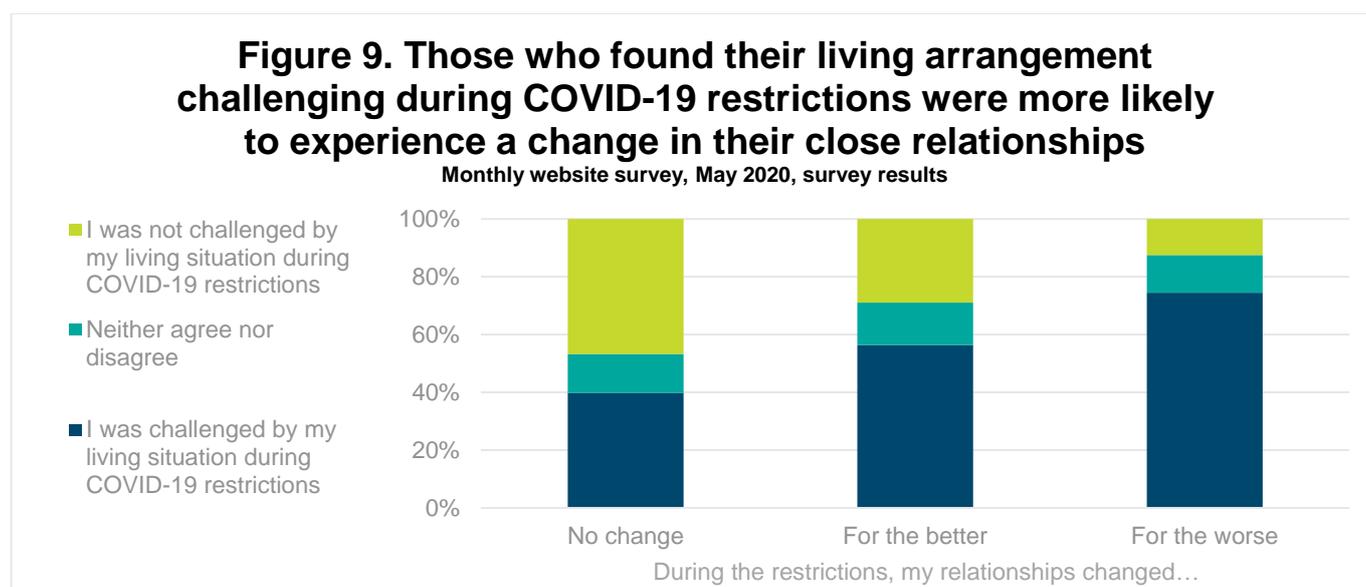
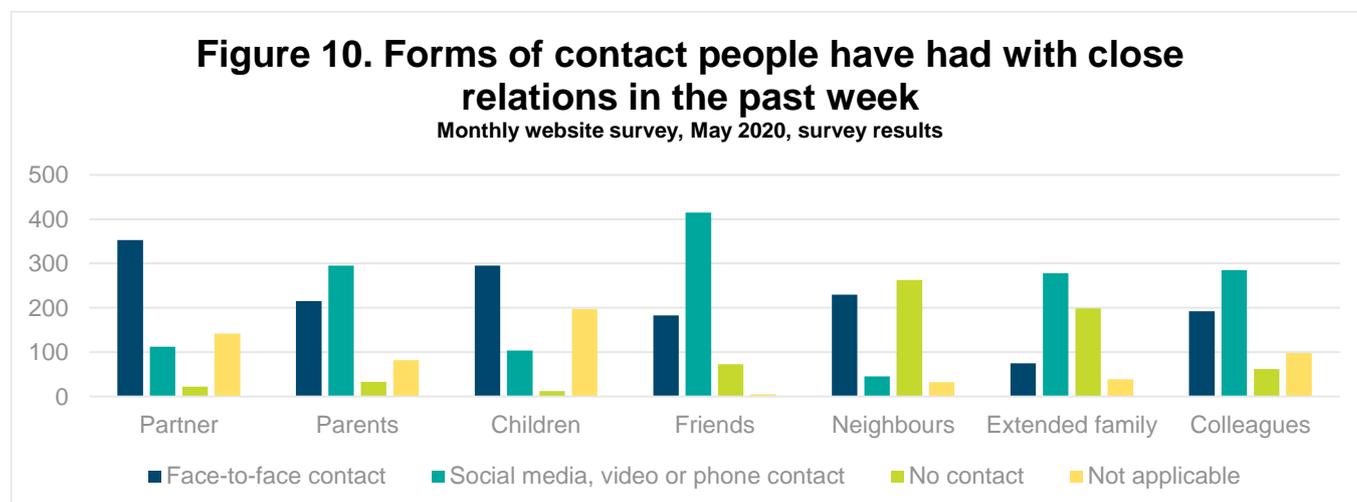


Figure 10 illustrates that the most common form of contact people had with their partners and children (during the surveying period) was face-to-face. This is to be expected given the high proportion (33%) of people who live with their children and partner as demonstrated in figure 2. Figure 10 also demonstrates that social media, video or phone contact was the most common type of contact made between people and their parents, friends, extended family and colleagues. Given the various physical distancing requirements that were in place at the time of the survey, this suggests many were adhering to the government's health mandates and engaging in alternative forms of contact.



Figures 11, 12 and 13 explore how loneliness affects people’s perceptions of relationship change throughout the COVID-19 restrictions. Figure 11 indicates that 45 percent of respondents either agreed (26%) or strongly agreed (19%) that they often felt very lonely. Comparatively, HILDA data suggests that around 9 percent of Australians experience loneliness at any one time (Baker 2012). This discrepancy could be caused by the interactional relationship between loneliness, relationship issues and mental health, as many who access our website may be experiencing these challenges. It could also suggest that the COVID-19 restrictions have led to increased levels of loneliness, however for this to be confirmed more targeted and representative research would need to be completed.

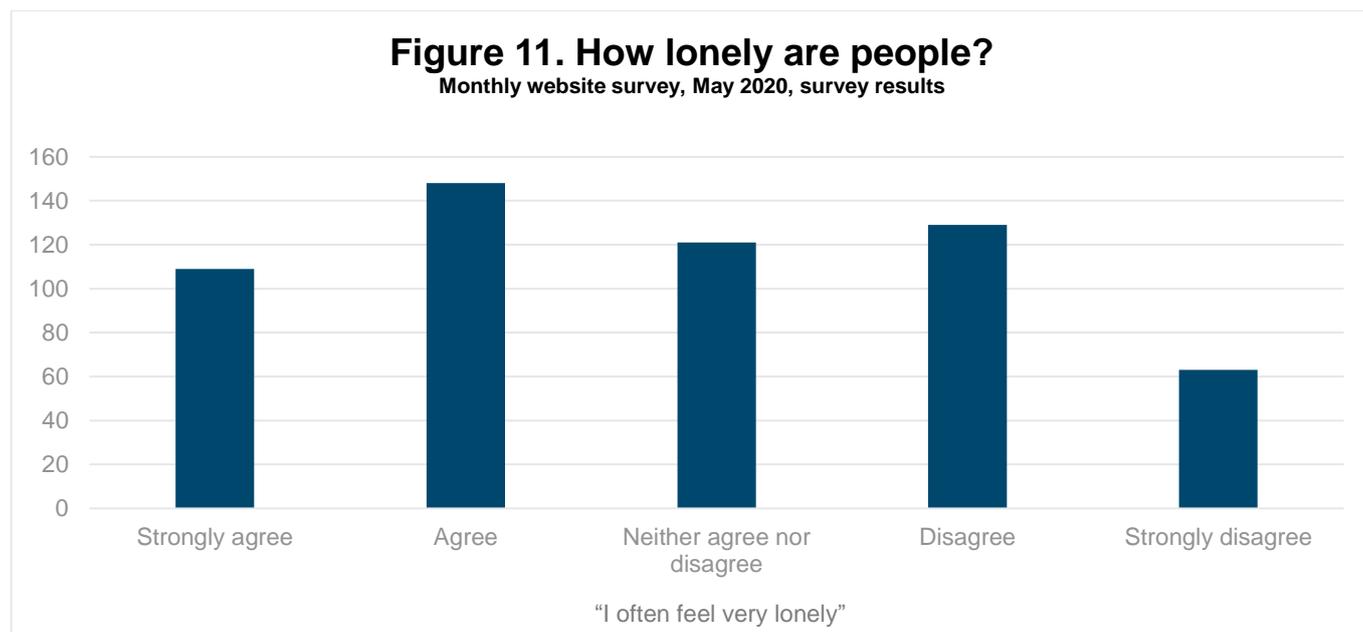
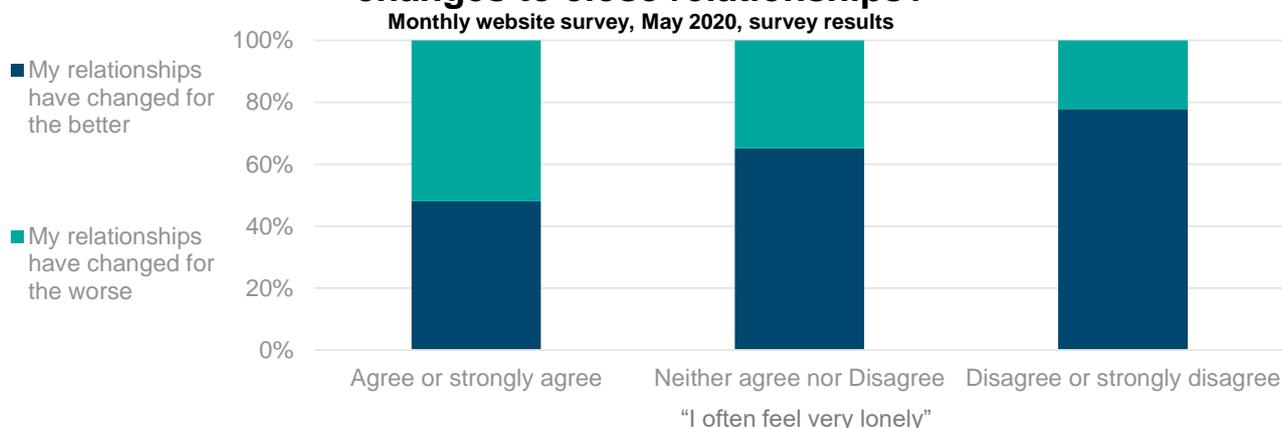


Figure 12 illustrates that there is a correlation between reported levels of loneliness and changes to relationships during the COVID-19 restrictions. 51 percent of those who often felt very lonely said their close relationships had changed for the worse. Conversely, only 22 percent of those who disagreed with the statement “I often feel very lonely” reported negative relationship changes. While we cannot determine the direction in which this occurs (does loneliness cause relationship breakdown or vice versa), the findings support extant literature stating a relationship between relationship breakdown and loneliness.

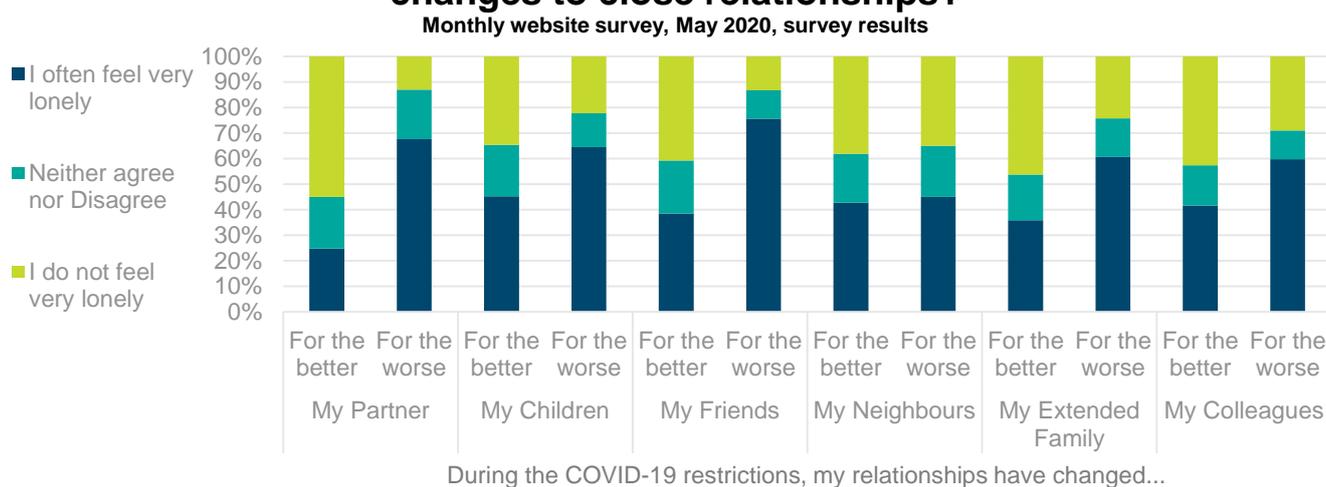
Loneliness can also refer to a lack of social support, which is of special concern during the COVID-19 restrictions. For example, as people spend more time at home, the ability to connect and feel supported by those they live with becomes paramount. For those who lack social support at home, the pressures of COVID-19 restrictions may have placed further pressure on their relationships, even with those they do not live with. It should be noted that this graph is an amalgamation of figure 13 and as such, reports averages across relationship categories.

Figure 12. How does loneliness intersect with perceived changes to close relationships?



Finally, figure 13 demonstrates how loneliness affects different relational categories. Those who reported often feeling very lonely were more likely to also report negative changes in their typically 'close' relationships (such as one's partner, children and friends). Relationships with neighbours, extended family and colleagues were less likely to be affected. Again, it is difficult to determine what causes this, as loneliness is a complex social issue. However, we can deduce that there is an association between loneliness and changes in relationships, especially those with the people with whom we live. It can also be concluded that as a result of the additional stressors of COVID-19 restrictions, those who experience loneliness have disproportionately reported negative changes in their close relationships. As such, we can assume that COVID-19 restrictions have placed additional pressure on those who experience loneliness.

Figure 13. How does loneliness intersect with perceived changes to close relationships?



References

Baker, D. (2012). *All the lonely people: Loneliness in Australia, 2001-2009*. Institute Paper No. 9, June.