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Submitted Online

Measuring what matters – consultation – Relationships Australia submission

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the ‘measuring what matters’ consultation. This submission will cover the recent research Relationships Australia produced which demonstrates a very strong link between relationships and wellbeing, and will make the case for including a measure of relationships as a component of wellbeing.

Relationships Australia’s work in the wellbeing space

Relationships Australia is a federation of community-based, not-for-profit organisations with no religious affiliations. Our services are for all members of the community, regardless of religious belief, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural background or economic circumstances.

Relationships Australia provides a range of services, including counselling, dispute resolution, children’s services, services for victims and perpetrators of family violence, services for older people, and relationship and professional education. We aim to support all people in Australia to live with positive and respectful relationships, and believe that people have the capacity to change how they relate to others. Relationships Australia has provided family relationships services for 75 years.

The core of our work is improving people’s wellbeing through respectful relationships. Through our programs, we work with people to enhance not only family relationships, but also relationships with friends, colleagues, and across communities. We engage in research and conduct advocacy across many stakeholder groups, to broaden understanding of the issues that affect relationships, and ultimately, people’s wellbeing.

This submission draws upon:

- our lengthy experience in delivering diverse programs
- evidence-based programs and research, and
- our leadership and policy development experience.

Relationship Indicators 2022

Relationship Indicators is the only nationally representative survey that captures the state of Australia’s relationships, and the effect that these relationships have on our wellbeing. The Relationships Indicators survey was previously run from 1998-2011. In response to the enormous effects of the pandemic and other challenges in recent years, Relationships Australia recognised a shift in Australia and was interested in gaining a better understanding of the state of relationships at a national level. Relationships Australia decided to reinvigorate the project with a renewed focus on research design and method, releasing the results in November 2022.

How we measured wellbeing in the survey

We recognised that wellbeing was a complex subject with a variety of different interpretations and measurement approaches. In Relationship Indicators 2022, we focused on subjective wellbeing as this aligned with the subjective methodological approach used throughout the survey.

Subjective wellbeing is understood as consisting of two key components: the emotional and cognitive judgements on one's life. Our survey employed Diener's *Satisfaction with Life* scale to explore this concept. Life satisfaction investigates only the cognitive aspect of wellbeing (Diener 1984). Notably, Diener's concept of cognitive wellbeing refers to how people evaluate their lives overall, as well as their evaluation of specific life domains. Additionally, our survey used several other validated tools to measure more emotional aspects of people's lives, including mental health and loneliness.

Evaluating people's wellbeing based on their subjective experience of life can be challenging. For example, having 'a bad day' before completing a wellbeing survey may cause people to complete the survey with varying responses. Our research employed a stable measure of wellbeing, which is found not to be affected by fleeting influences and is stable across self and peer-reported measures (Pavot et. Al. 1991). As such, this scale is considered reliable and predictable and is suited for use with a wide range of age groups and applications (Pavot & Diener 1993; Diener et. Al. 1993).¹

Wellbeing figures for Australians

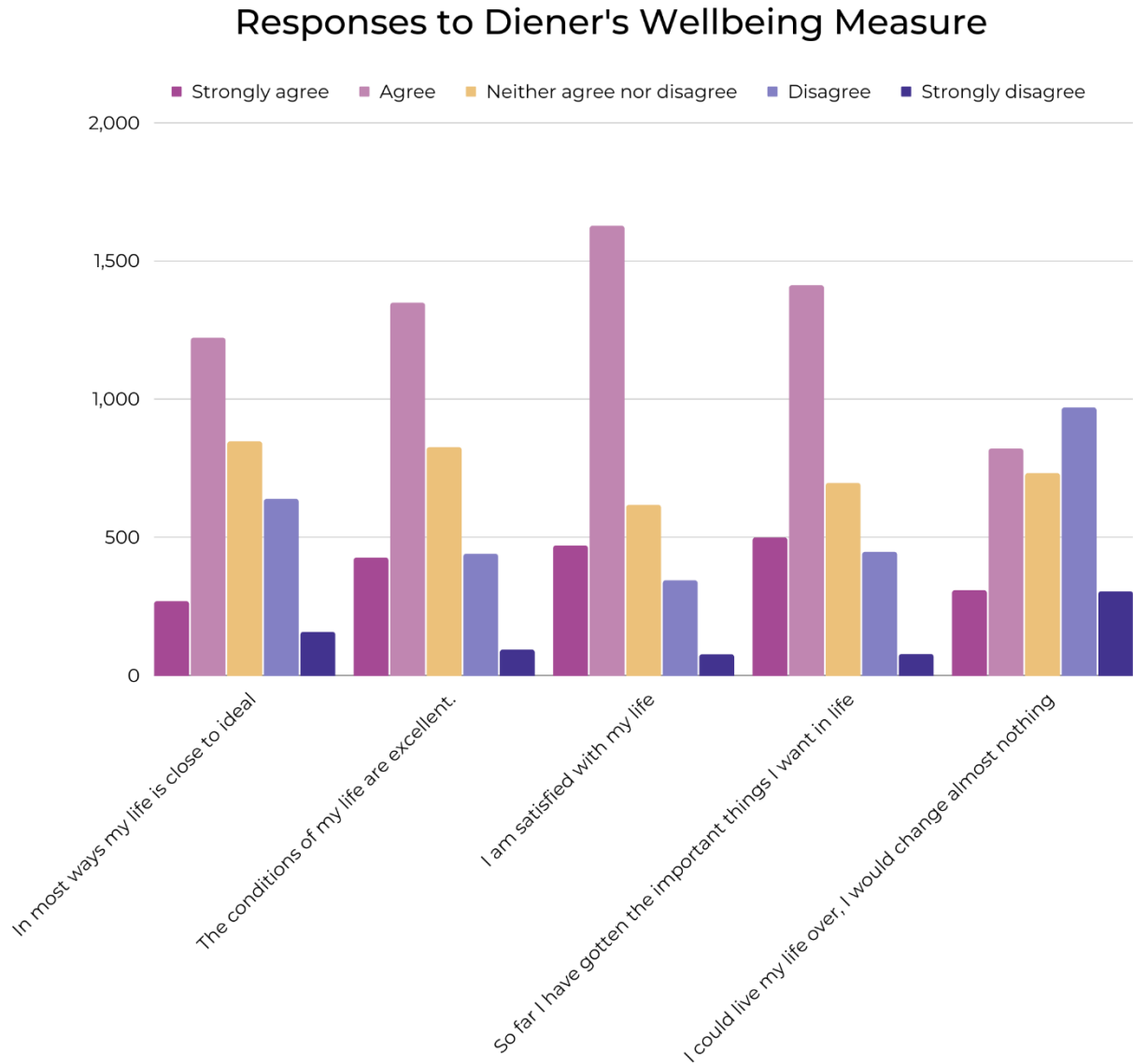
Below we have included a graph depicting the subjective wellbeing figures for Australians, based on their responses to Diener's *Satisfaction with Life* scale. In June 2022, 3141 people completed the Relationship Indicators survey, a sample which is generalisable to the Australian population. For more information on this, please see the section 'How reliable is the data?' later in this submission.

Relationship Indicators found that 23% of Australians were completely satisfied with life, meaning they either agreed or strongly agreed with all the statements in the measure. A further 17.9% of Australians agreed with 4 of 5 statements and another 14% agreed with 3 of the 5 statements. Furthermore, when analysing each statement individually, a majority of Australians agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. Australians were most likely to agree that they were 'satisfied with [their] life' (66.8%) and were least likely to agree that if they could live their life over, they 'would change almost nothing' (36%). During our analysis, linear modelling illustrated that statement one (0.85), two (0.82) and three (0.82) were most strongly correlated with subjective wellbeing, while statement four (0.74) and five (0.62) were least correlated for our participants. As such, the statements that were most strongly correlated with subjective wellbeing were also most likely to be agreed with.

¹ *The Satisfaction with Life Scale* (1985) - Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin

1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
2. The conditions of my life are excellent.
3. I am satisfied with my life.
4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

Graphic 1: Relationship Indicators 2022 – Wellbeing figures for Australians (June 2022)



The case for relationships as an important component of wellbeing

Relationship Indicators found a strong link between a variety of important, meaningful relationships and subjective wellbeing. This link was found across several different measures, including relationship satisfaction, age, relationship pressures and feelings of love, as well as being affected by specific relationship and age-associated issues such as deteriorating health and caring duties. Below, we have listed some key findings from the report, which demonstrate the link between relationships and wellbeing.

Key Finding 1: Satisfying relationships are good for wellbeing. The more satisfactory someone's important relationship was, the better their subjective wellbeing.

Relationship satisfaction isn't just important for the health of relationships; it also predicts satisfaction with life. Our research found that the more satisfactory someone's relationship

was, the better their subjective wellbeing. This was not just limited to partner relationships, but to all relationships, including familial relationships, friendships, and others.

Relationship satisfaction is the subjective evaluation of a relationship and is considered one of the most crucial measures of relationship functioning. We explored relationship satisfaction for the relationship people declared as their 'most important [and] meaningful', which could be any relationship in their life. Like wellbeing, Relationships Australia recognised that relationships are complex. Rather than measuring relationship satisfaction as binary, (for example, if my relationship is not good, it must be bad), we used a two-dimensional measure to demonstrate that satisfaction is more than an absence of negative emotion and vice versa.² Respondents were asked to consider only the positive or negative qualities of their most important relationship and then state whether they felt this relationship matched a selection of terms.³

Subjective wellbeing had a correlation of 0.28 with 'positive relationship statements' and -0.17 with 'negative relationship statements'. So, respondents who agreed with the positive terms and disagreed with the negative terms also had higher levels of subjective wellbeing.

In particular, Relationships Australia found that describing a relationship as 'full' was the strongest predictor of subjective wellbeing. Conversely, feeling 'lonely' in a relationship is one of the greatest forecasters for feeling dissatisfied with life. When we explored the qualitative responses we also found that those respondents who felt their relationship was not full and was lonely, selected this relationship as their 'most important relationship' because other closer relationships had broken down or were affected by geographic separation. This suggests that relationship breakdown or geographic separation from an important person in your life has a negative effect on subjective wellbeing.

While our analysis did not differentiate between the direction of this correlation, for example, do strong relationships improve wellbeing, or does poor wellbeing affect relationships, through our practice and advocacy work, Relationships Australia believes that the correlation is likely bi-directional.

² Measuring both the positive and negative aspects of a relationship allow us to distinguish between what kind of dissatisfaction people are experiencing and the underlying processes or issues that may be affecting these. Specifically, semantic differential measures – such as the one we used here – provide a powerful pathway for exploring specific positive or negative expressions towards a relationship, telling us distinct information about relationship functioning.

³ Each respondent was asked the following question 14 times for each distinct term: Considering now only the positive qualities of your relationship and ignoring the negative ones, please evaluate your relationship on the following qualities: Our relationship is: Interesting, Full, Sturdy, Enjoyable, Good, Friendly, Hopeful

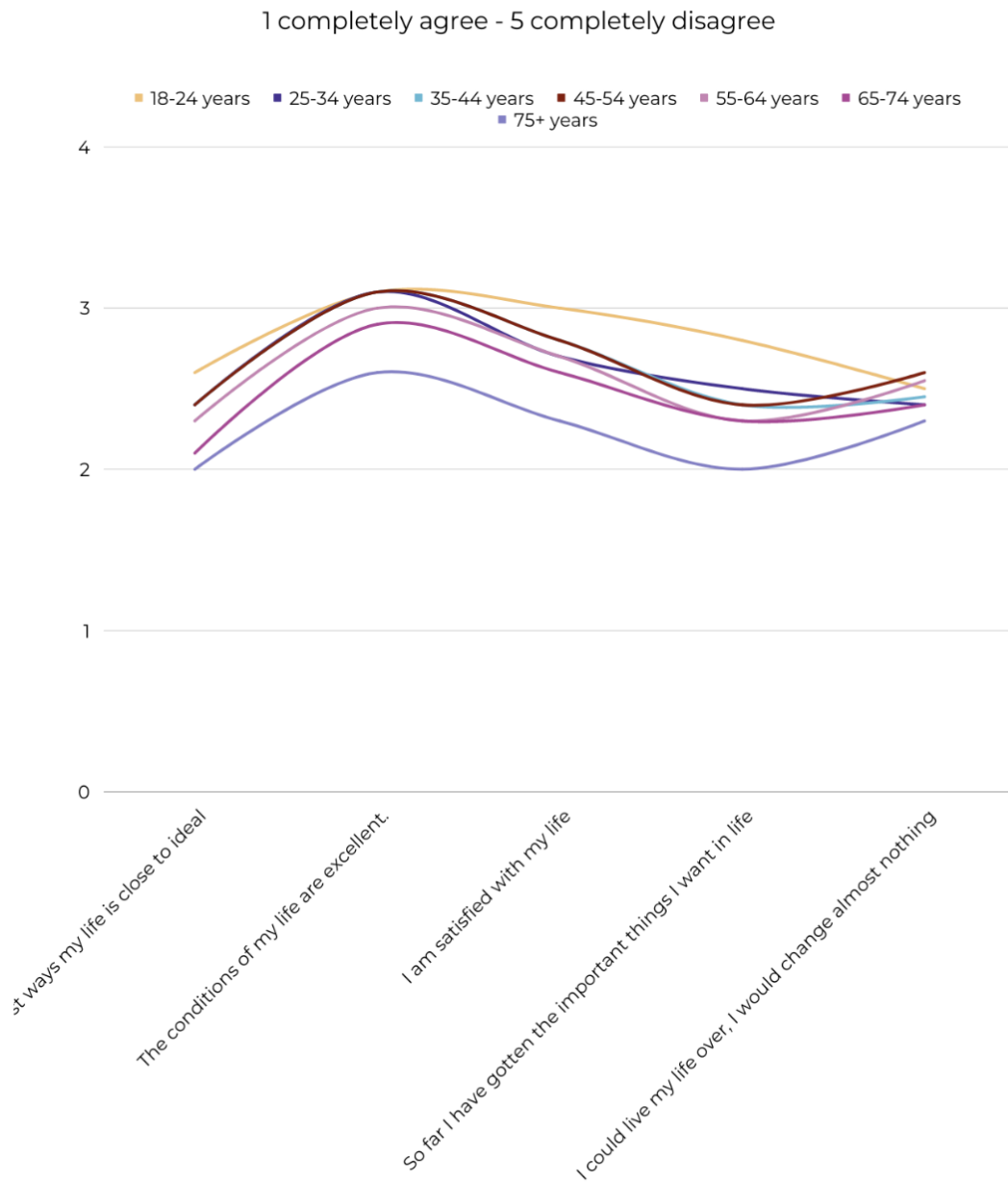
Considering now only the negative qualities of your relationship and ignoring the positive ones, please evaluate your relationship on the following qualities: Our relationship is: Bad, Lonely, Discouraging, Boring, Empty, Fragile, Miserable

Key Finding 2: Generally, older people were more satisfied with life than younger people. This was most prevalent when comparing the responses of the oldest and youngest groups.

Our analysis also found that subjective wellbeing increased for older people. This was especially true for those aged 65+. Across four of the five measures of subjective wellbeing, as age brackets increased,⁴ people were more likely to agree with the statements.

Graphic 2: Relationship Indicators 2022 – The effect of age on subjective wellbeing

Age-based responses to Diener's Subjective Wellbeing Measure (median score for age group)



⁴ The age brackets were as follows: 18-24 years, 25-34 years, 35-44 years, 45-54 years, 55-64 years, 65-74 years and 75+ years

However, the measure exploring 'conditions of life' broke this pattern. Our research found that middle aged people (aged 45-64 years) were least likely to agree with the statement 'the condition of their life was excellent'. Additionally, younger people (18-44 year old's) saw a spike in this measure of satisfaction. Middle and older aged people were more likely to agree with reflective statements about life, including 'so far I have gotten the most important things I want in life' and 'if I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing', suggesting that age helps people clarify and come to terms with the various changes in life and soothes worries related to what might be lacking.

While Relationships Australia was interested in the effect age played on subjective wellbeing, we were specifically interested in how this related to age-based relationship challenges. Through our practice, we recognised that many of our services targeted specific age groups. Given the connection between relationship satisfaction, something which is affected by relationship challenges, and subjective wellbeing, we were interested in exploring the more relational reasonings behind these age-based findings.

Key Finding 3: The combined effects of caring duties, deteriorating health and relationship breakdown reduces subjective wellbeing, especially for middle aged people (those aged 45-64).

When exploring the qualitative responses in the survey, analysis demonstrated that part of the reason for lower subjective wellbeing in those aged 45-64 years old was the conditions of their life. As people aged and relationships shifted, these issues influenced their subjective wellbeing. Middle aged people faced more day-to-day struggles than the young and old. For example, the 'sandwich generation', those caring for aging parents as well as their own children, the role of double caring responsibilities placed pressure on their most important relationship. Additionally, many mentioned the role of new or worsening physical health conditions, relationship breakdown, including separation and divorce and work commitments – all playing a role in diminishing relationship satisfaction and therefore subjective wellbeing.

Alternatively, we found that retiring had a strong effect on their relationship satisfaction and wellbeing. Retirees had lower levels of loneliness, greater relationship satisfaction and fewer relationship pressures, culminating in higher subjective wellbeing. Qualitative responses illustrated that retiring had greatly improved their life satisfaction, allowing them to spend more time with loved ones. This pattern matched the age-mediated improvements to subjective wellbeing.

Key Finding 4: Subjective wellbeing was correlated with life transitions and several other measures of relationship 'health'

Relationship pressures, while a typical part of the human experience, had an effect on subjective wellbeing. Relationship pressures can be internal or external factors which can challenge the relationship and often require strategies to manage their effects. Respondents to our survey were asked to identify which pressures their important relationship had experienced in the last six months. While pressures affecting a relationship are not evidence of an 'unhealthy' relationship, their continued or combined effect can slowly work to erode the health of a relationship. Relationship Indicators found that people who experienced

relationship pressures, and those who experienced multiple at once, had reduced subjective wellbeing, which was also associated with reduced relationship satisfaction.⁵

Interestingly, age was also a factor mediating the prevalence of relationship pressures. While our analysis did not have the capacity to individuate the effect of these co-related concepts, there is clear evidence that age, or life transitions, play a significant role in wellbeing – perhaps mediated by the relationships present at different moments throughout the lifespan. Other research has also found a strong relationship between ageing and wellbeing. Qu and de Vaus (2015, pp. 2-3) note that life satisfaction sharply declines from 15 through to the early 20's, then gradually declines from the 20's-30's, is more stable mid-30's-early 50's (although is at the lowest level of life satisfaction), improves from the 50's-late 60's and remains steady at the highest point until the 80's when it declines a little, although remains higher than most earlier periods of life. This pattern was mostly reflected in Relationship Indicators 2022. While Qu and de Vaus suggest that this relates to processes of maturation and ageing, it cannot be divorced from the likely life transitions occurring at these times, especially those which are relationship-based. For example, in their review, they quote research that demonstrates that financial crises and relationship breakdown reduce wellbeing, but retirement does not. Their review also notes the following relationship-based issues as having an effect on wellbeing:

- Remaining single over time, or having a partner, with the latter showing more stable or improved and sustained life satisfaction / subjective wellbeing.
- The birth of a child led to an immediate improvement in life satisfaction followed by a sharp decline, especially for women; more gradually for men, with it declining steadily for both 6 years post-birth.
- Wellbeing for women deteriorated in the years before separation and then straight after separation for men.
- Single mothers experienced a reduction in wellbeing when the last child left home.

This provides further proof of the role that a variety of healthy and respectful relationships play in subjective wellbeing, as well as evidence for its fluctuating nature occurring across the lifespan – which should be considered in any attempts to measure wellbeing.

Love is difficult to quantify, and researchers have often focused on the benefits of romantic love when exploring its advantages. Despite a variety of definitions, social research tends to understand love as an emotion and/or set of emotions deriving from social connectedness. Our analysis found that feeling loved was correlated with all five measures of life satisfaction, suggesting that feeling loved is important for subjective wellbeing. Similarly, the concept of love was difficult to differentiate from other concepts, and as such, those who felt loved also had higher relationship satisfaction, were less likely to feel lonely and had a similar age-related pattern, where those aged 18-24 years were least likely to say they felt loved and those 65+ were most likely. Despite this, feelings of love were high, with 94.5% of Australians stating they felt loved. So, while we believe love is a good additional measure of the strength of wellbeing, concepts such as relationship satisfaction and relationship-based challenges are better at differentiating the effect of relationships on subjective wellbeing.

Finally, our research explored the concept of loneliness in relative detail. People who were lonely had reduced subjective wellbeing. We found that loneliness had increased since our

⁵ We completed 13 pairwise comparison of exploring the 13 pressures against the 5 measures of life satisfaction. Total tests: 13*5=65, all were significant with p value less than 0.05.

research conducted in 2018, especially levels of social loneliness (Relationships Australia, 2018). We found that 28% of Australians were feeling socially lonely, while 19.8% feel emotionally lonely. Emotional loneliness is the lack of a significant person with whom you have an attachment to, whereas social loneliness is the lack of a larger support network. While both had an effect on subjective wellbeing, the sharp increase in social loneliness since 2018 is notable, as we believe this provides evidence to suggest that subjective wellbeing was affected by the recent social restrictions, culminating in an increase in loneliness. As such, there is evidence that the pandemic has influenced wellbeing, partly through the loss of fulfilling social relationships. Relationship Australia believes that the concept of loneliness could also be included in a robust measurement of wellbeing.

What didn't have a reliable effect on wellbeing

We also used the survey to explore a series of common relationship issues, to explore how these affected satisfaction and wellbeing. This included statements such as 'we have fun together', 'we communicate openly about our problems', 'we don't spend enough time together', 'we have lots of disagreements'. These measures were developed in consultation with Relationships Australia staff based on statements and inductive reasoning from their work supporting relationships.

Interestingly, these did not have a reliable or reportable effect on subjective wellbeing. They did affect relationship satisfaction, however, none of these were so strongly correlated with satisfaction that we were able to say 'this is the key to a happy relationship'. This, and the lack of a consistent effect on any of the measures of subjective wellbeing, suggest that singular relationship concerns do not have an effect on subjective wellbeing, whereas a more robust measure of relationship satisfaction does. This provides further evidence of the complex role relationships play on wellbeing and provides evidence for the importance of including a sophisticated measure of relationships in order to appropriately capture their impact on wellbeing.

The importance of measuring relationships

Relationship Indicators was uniquely effective in linking the role a variety of different relationships play in subjective wellbeing, as well as co-related concepts such as ageing, life cycle transitions, love and loneliness. Relationships Australia believes that when 'measuring what matters', it would be remiss to not include a measure, or several, that capture the effect relationships have on wellbeing. While we recognise that there are other related concepts like 'social interactions' and 'social support' included, having close, strong, respectful, and reliable relationships are a different concept.

The final, but most important finding we would like to present in this submission demonstrates the importance of a singular strong and reliable relationship.

Although Relationships Australia acknowledges the importance of a variety of strong and reliable relationships, something which has been widely reflected in the social network literature and [our own research](#) and [reporting](#), we found a strong correlation across a variety of variables that suggests the importance of having one, reliable relationship.

People who selected more than one person across a variety of social support measures had lower subjective wellbeing. Similarly, people who relied on multiple relationships illustrated a higher than average number of relationship pressures compared to those with one form of support. They also demonstrated worse mental health over the past six months and were lonelier. Additionally, those who chose their 'most important person' in these social support

questions scored better across these measures than those who chose a different relationship. For example, people who chose their partner as their most important person and then also were able to rely on them for a variety of different emotional, social and physical supports were better off than someone who said they would rely on multiple people for support. To measure this, we re-administered a selection of survey questions from the 2017 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes. The pervasiveness of this finding suggests that having one strong relationship on which you can rely for social, emotional, and physical support is extremely important for wellbeing.

As such, Relationships Australia believes that a measure of wellbeing should include a measure which captures people's close relationship/s and the satisfaction and reliability of this relationship, as opposed to just including a more general measure that only explores social interactions or social support. While almost all respondents had forms of social support and social interaction, those who had a singular reliable relationship had higher wellbeing, had greater relationship satisfaction, better mental health, were less lonely and had fewer relationship pressures. In short, while social interactions and support were important for wellbeing, the effect of a singular reliable relationship was notably more effective.

For more information, you can read the [Relationship Indicators Full Report](#).

What benefit will come from including relationships in a wellbeing measure?

Relationships Australia believes that relationships are integral to the human experience and therefore understanding the health of these relationships is part of a holistic view of wellbeing.

Relationships Australia also recognises that relationships are often positioned as secondary or arising from other social and environmental measures of health and wellbeing. For example, it is understood that a person's relationships may be affected by being unhoused, experiencing long-term health concerns or lack of employment. Policy is less likely to recognise that relationships can also be the cause of homelessness, loss of employment and long-term health conditions.

Respectful, healthy and fulfilling relationships are not merely a side effect of other social and environmental factors but can also be the cause of them. Our research and practice experience demonstrates that supporting people to develop and maintain respectful relationships can in fact lead to improvements in employment, education, housing, health and other domain measures. While relationships may be captured through, or mediated by, other variables, including a discrete measure will support the government and other researchers to differentiate the direction of these effects and more appropriately develop policy to respond.

Relationships Australia believes that including relationships in the wellbeing measure will allow the government to:

1. Measure the health of relationships generally.
2. Better understand the economy and society by differentiating the effect of strong and reliable relationships on other wellbeing domains.
3. Develop more appropriate and successful policy responses to economic, social and environmental issues.

4. Inform service design, especially in the family and relationship sectors, with strong cascading effects in other domains.
5. Allow government and other funders prioritise areas for funding.

How reliable is the data?

Updated survey design and reliability

This survey was designed by an advisory panel at Relationships Australia, as well as seeking consultation from academics for specific focus areas. It was redesigned from old iterations of Relationship Indicators to incorporate a variety of newly developed scales, validated tools and some questions to test our own assumptions as service providers.⁶

The survey was tested using cognitive interviewing, a technique which ensures the survey questions are accurately addressing research questions. The questionnaire was then refined in consultation with the Social Research Centre.

Survey applicability

Following a competitive tender, the Social Research Centre (SRC) was chosen to collect the data, using Life in Australia™. Life in Australia™ is recognised as Australia's most methodologically rigorous online/offline panel. This is because it solely uses probability-based sampling methods and covers both online and offline population. A probability sample is one in which each element of the population has a known, non-zero chance of selection. This means the findings are generalisable to the Australian population. For further information about the design, data collection and methodological aspects of the Relationship Indicators Report, please refer to our [Technical Report](#).

⁶ While we noted that the previous Relationship Indicators had appropriately focused on the partnered relationship, the panel was interested in using this survey to reflect the broad range of relationships that make up the Australian experience and which we encounter in our service provision. In response, Relationships Australia developed a survey that explored the 'most important, meaningful' relationship people have in their lives. This examined the tools people use to navigate these relationships and the wellbeing, mental health and emotional outcomes of these. The survey also explored people's experiences with partnered relationship breakdown and bereavement, as well as other emerging relationship issues. Lastly, the survey focused on people's social identity, by exploring the role group relationships play and the effect these have on other relationships, health outcomes and wellbeing.

Concluding remarks and suggestions

We believe that the evidence provided throughout this submission, as well as the [Relationship Indicators Full Report](#) available on our website, demonstrates the important and unique role relationships play in wellbeing. Relationships Australia believes that when 'measuring what matters', it would be remiss to not include a measure, or several, that capture the effect relationships have on wellbeing.

Relationships Australia thanks you for the opportunity to provide feedback on this consultation. Should you wish to discuss any aspect of it, or the services that Relationships Australia provides, please do not hesitate to contact me by email (ntebbey@relationships.org.au) or our Senior Research and Project Officer, Claire Fisher, who led the Relationship Indicators project (cfisher@relationships.org.au), or by telephone on 02 6162 9300.

Kind regards

Nick Tebbey

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nick Tebbey', with a stylized flourish at the end.

National Executive Officer

Relationships Australia