Media Release

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Australians 'remarkably resilient' during COVID-19

Despite reporting elevated levels of stress and anxiety through the COVID-19 pandemic, remarkably, Australians have maintained a relatively stable sense of wellbeing.

The 2020 survey of 2,000 Australians, conducted during the first national lock-down between 27 April and 19 May 2020, revealed an average personal wellbeing score of 76.45 (out of 100), which is within the normal range (see figures 1 and 2 below).

Measured using **nationally representative data,** these results remain consistent with findings over the 20-year history of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, indicating that Australians have retained a strong sense of life satisfaction, despite the many challenges faced during the first national lock-downs.

Individual subjective wellbeing is closely associated with three key elements—financial security, strong relationships with others, and a sense of purpose in life—dubbed the 'Golden Triangle of Wellbeing'.
Wellbeing is also influenced by people's connectedness to their communities, good health and sense of personal safety and security about the future. Participants in the latest survey on COVID-19 reported high scores across each of these elements of wellbeing.

Report author, Associate Professor Delyse Hutchinson from Deakin University's Centre for Social and Early Emotional Development, in the School of Psychology, said that "the findings speak to the resilience of the Australian community in the face of major stress and our adaptive capability as a society."

The research shows the vast majority of Australians reported feeling grateful for the things they have in life, with nearly all survey participants (96%) reporting having greater empathy for others and almost as many (96%) more gratitude for the things they have in life (see figure 3).

"Despite it being such a challenging year on so many fronts, most Australians have also been able to find some meaningful positives to draw on", Associate Professor Hutchinson said.

One in three of the participants surveyed reported income-loss due to COVID-19 yet this did not appear to compromise quality family time. Improved work life balance and living more simply were also examples of the positives people reported during lock-down.

Associate Professor Hutchinson suggested that, "greater levels of gratitude and appreciation for the things we have in life might, in part, might be behind this remarkable picture of resilience in the Australian population as a whole. There is growing evidence from research around the world to suggest that values such as these can bolster our emotional resilience, enhancing our inner ability to combat stress."[1-4]

"Whilst many Australians have reported positives, it also remains a challenging time for many in the community who are more vulnerable due to pre-existing factors (potentially compounded by the pandemic), or as a result of challenges that have arisen as a direct result of the pandemic", she said.

"The groups we identified with poorer emotional health and wellbeing include: adults with pre-existing low income, people who are unemployed and those who experienced significant income loss as a direct result of the pandemic, in addition to adults with poorer mental health."

"We also found high levels of stress and more home life difficulties in dual and single parents with dependent children at home, and adults under 35 years studying full-time."

Associate Professor Hutchinson said that "it is critically important that we continue to focus support on those who are most vulnerable in our population, who may be impacted by multiple stressors during the pandemic."

As part of this task, Deakin University, in conjunction with Australian Unity, will continue to track the wellbeing of Australians over 2021-2023, monitoring any longer-term impacts on the community in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Australian Unity's CEO of Wealth & Capital Markets, Esther Kerr-Smith said "it was positive to see—during such a difficult period —people draw on inner resources including gratitude and empathy to support their own wellbeing and those of others but acknowledged that some parts of the community found this more challenging."

"The pandemic has highlighted economic and social inequality across the globe and we know that those most socially and economically disadvantaged have an increased chance of contracting COVID-19 because of factors including: living in overcrowded accommodation, employment in occupations that don't provide working from home options and unstable work and income conditions exacerbated by the response to the pandemic."

"For the two decades Australian Unity has supported the Wellbeing Index we have consistently seen that financial wellbeing or economic empowerment is just as important as health, as a determinant of someone's personal wellbeing score." she said.

"As policy makers and the general public look to support our communities and one another through and out of the pandemic, the findings from the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index can play an important role in guiding resources to our vulnerable so they aren't left further behind as a result of COVID-19", Ms. Kerr-Smith said.

The full report can be viewed at: http://www.acqol.com.au/publications#reports

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About Australian Unity

Established in 1840, we're Australia's first member-owned wellbeing company, delivering health, wealth and care services. We're committed to real wellbeing for all Australians, and for us, real wellbeing means so much more than physical health. It's about your standard of living and feeling safe in your home. It's your personal relationships and being connected to

your community. It's about what you want to achieve in life, while having the security to get out and do what makes you happy.

Being a member-owned company—also called a mutual—means we're owned by our members, not shareholders. That gives us the freedom to invest money back into the services and solutions that matter most to our members, customers and the Australian community. We can also make long-term decisions.

www.australianunity.com.au

About Deakin University

Established in 1974, Deakin University was the first university in regional Victoria and the first to specialise in distance education. Deakin today has five campuses: one in Melbourne's eastern suburbs, two in Geelong, one in Warrnambool with the fifth, and fastest growing campus, in the cloud (online).

The Australian Centre on Quality of Life (ACQol) was established to study evidence-based measures for quality of life. ACQol formed a partnership with Australian Unity in 2000 to develop the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index.

www.deakin.edu.au
www.acqol.com.au

Appendices

Figure 1: Wellbeing in Australian adults, 2001-2020

Figure 2: Satisfaction with life in Australia, 2001-2020

Figure 3: Positive experiences reported by Australians during COVID-19

References

Biographies of quoted spokespeople

Figure 1

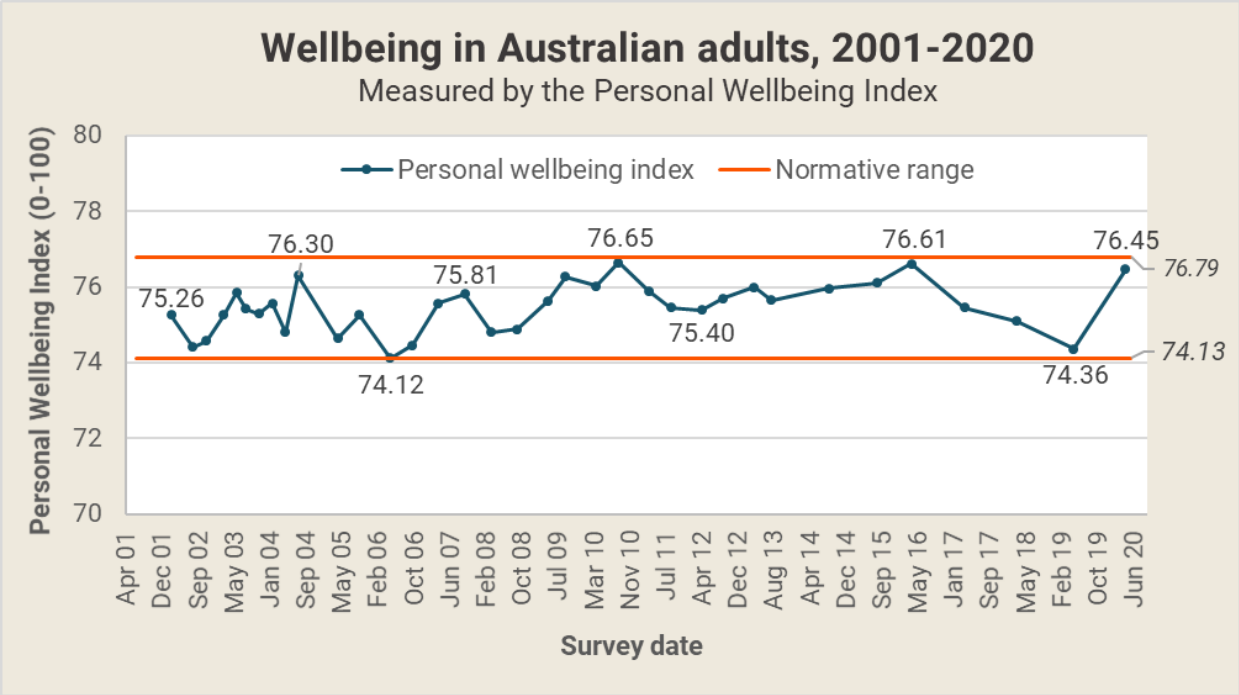


Figure 2

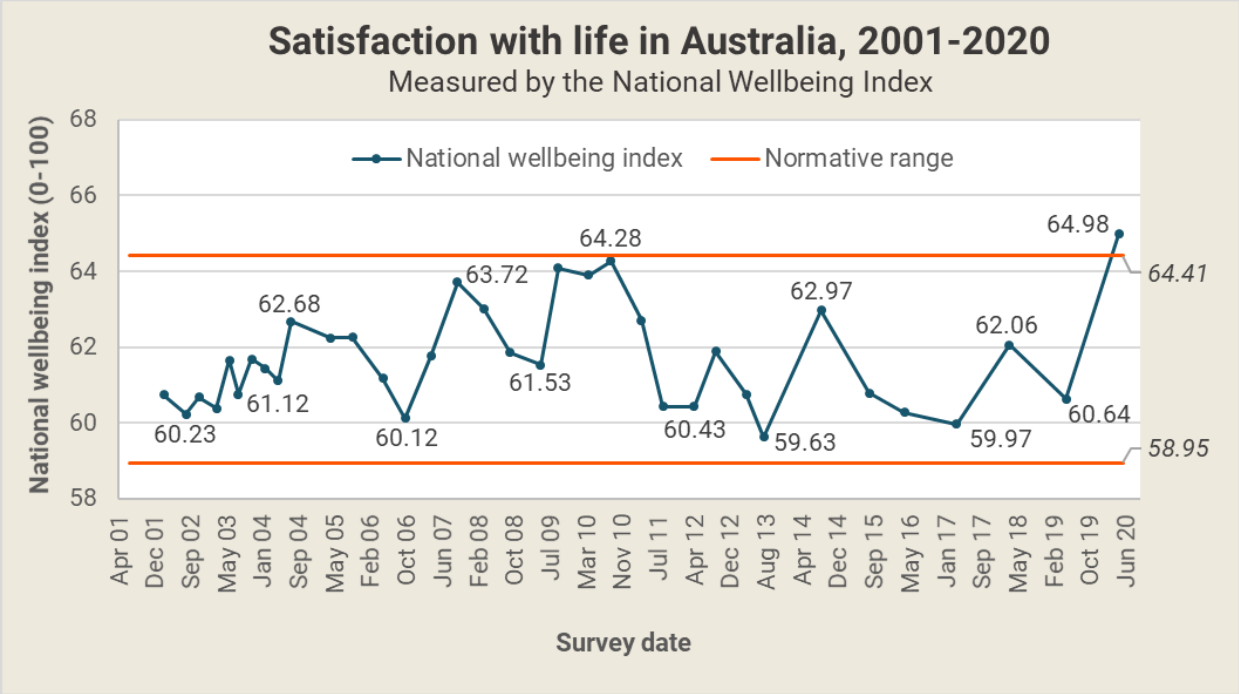
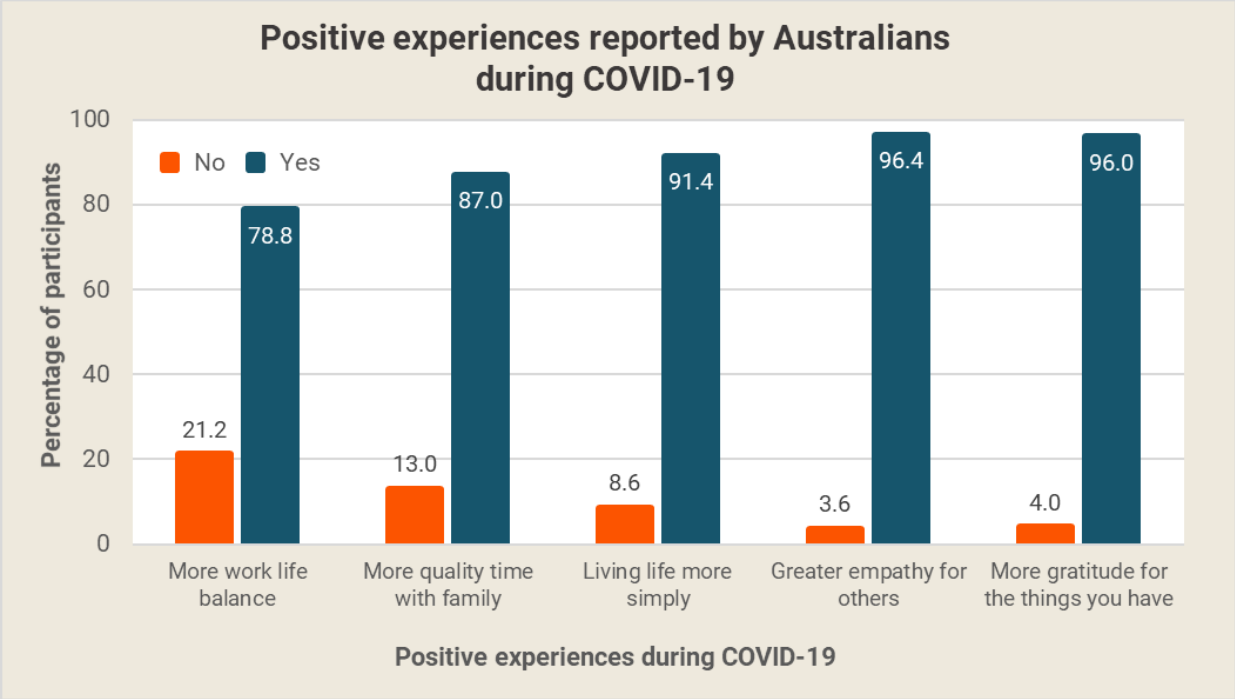


Figure 3



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2 Garland EL, Fredrickson B, Kring AM, Johnson DP, Meyer PS, Penn DL. Upward spirals of positive emotions counter downward spirals of negativity: Insights from the broaden-and-build theory and affective neuroscience on the treatment of emotion dysfunctions and deficits in psychopathology. *Clinical Psychology Review* 2010; 30(7): 849-64.

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4 Wood AM, Froh JJ, Geraghty AWA. Gratitude and well-being: A review and theoretical integration. *Clinical Psychology Review* 2010; 30(7): 890-905.

Biographies of quoted spokespersons

Delyse Hutchinson

Associate Professor Delyse Hutchinson from Deakin University's Centre for Social and Early Emotional Development is the author of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index report. Her major research interests include, understanding the developmental origins of mental and behavioural disorders and she is adept at epidemiology, pregnancy, child development, psychology and public health.

Delyse has authored the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, now in its 20th year, for six years and can speak in depth to the research findings.

Esther Kerr-Smith

Esther is Chief Executive Officer for Wealth & Capital Markets in the Australian Unity Group. Esther is responsible for all of Australian Unity's financial services and investment activities, spanning investment management, advice, trustee services, life and superannuation, as well as the Group's property, development and capital management activities. Esther is also a board member of many of its operating entities.

Prior to joining Australian Unity in September 2017, Esther's previous experience covered financial services, infrastructure and human services design and delivery. Esther was a senior executive with the National Disability Insurance Agency—leading the market stewardship and commissioning functions, including working with start-up accelerators and investors to support the development of the disability sector—and has held senior roles at strategy consulting firm Boston Consulting Group and within Macquarie Group's infrastructure division.