

# Relationships Australia

## Monthly Website Survey

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**June/July 2021: Enduring Changes to Home Life from the Pandemic**

## Introduction

Sixteen months since restrictions were introduced in Australia, and twelve months since we completed our [COVID-19 and its effects on relationships](#) series, we have re-introduced the monthly survey to explore the ongoing effects COVID-19 is having on people's home life.

The May/June survey received 556 responses. The demographic profile of survey respondents is consistent with our experience of the groups of people who access the Relationships Australia website.

## Key Findings

- 1** **50% said they think differently about their role living in the community**
- 2** **54% said they have had to re-assess their, or their family's, priorities**
- 3** **58% of respondents said they had a different appreciation or understanding of their mental health**
- 4** **People were much more likely to perceive changes (both positive and negative) to their relationships in June 2021 than in May 2020.**

Table 1. Changes to home life since/because of the pandemic

Strongly agree   Agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Disagree   Strongly disagree

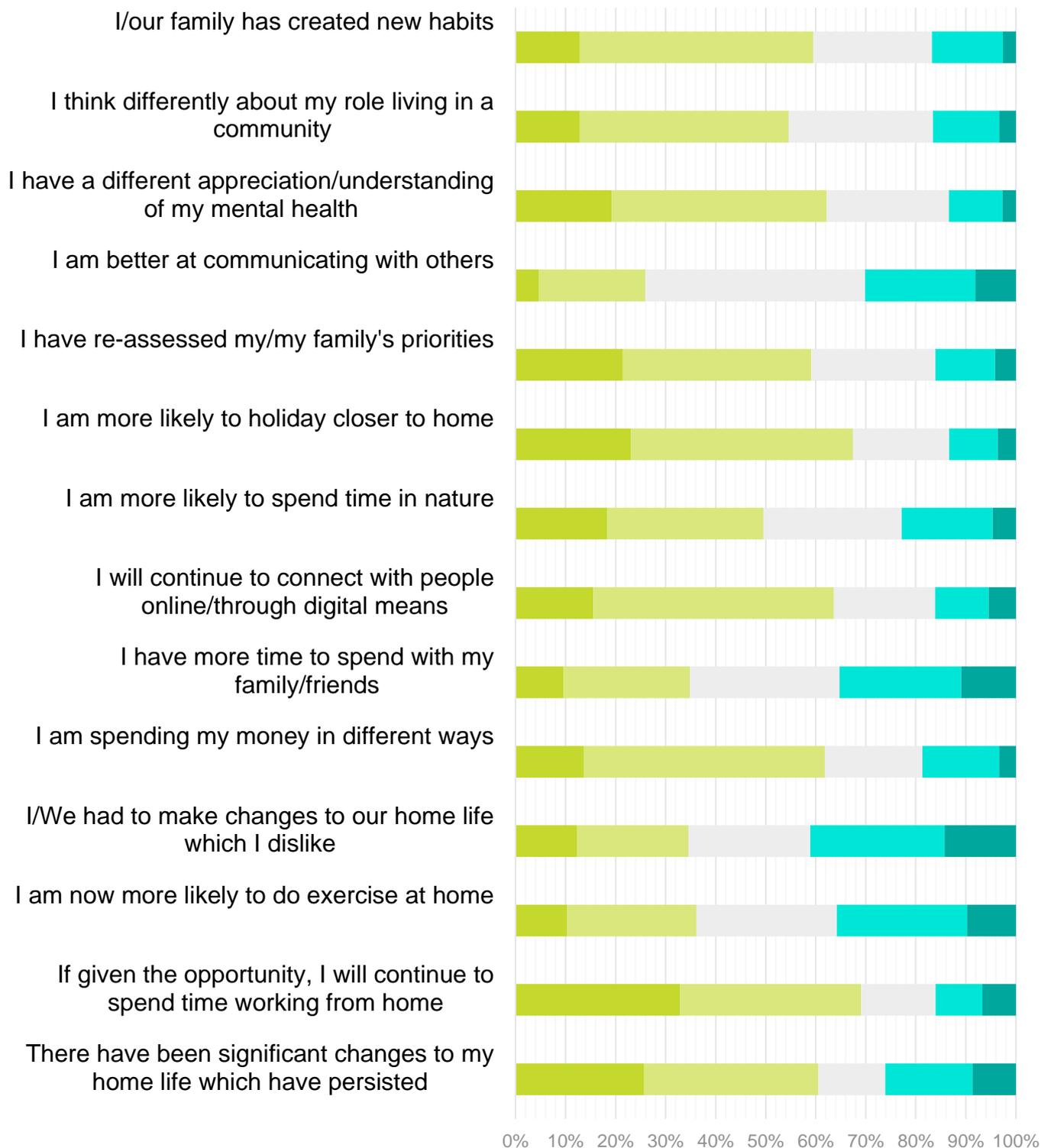


Table 1 demonstrates the changes to people's home life that have occurred in response to, or following, the pandemic. The survey found that 60% of people have experienced persistent and significant changes to their home life and 57% of people had created new habits during /because of the pandemic. Just 35% of people said they had to make changes to their home life which they disliked, despite almost half (49%) providing a short-answer which elaborated on an aspect of the pandemic which they disliked. The responses, including things such as masks, venue limitations, negativity and fatigue, mental health and financial struggles, suggest that, while people may not feel as though their home life has undergone unfavourable changes, aspects that affect generalised wellbeing certainly have.

### **Working from home (WFH)**

According to the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), as of July 2020, the proportion of people who always worked from home rose from 7% before COVID-19 to 60% during it (Hand et al., 2020). Among our respondents,

**69% said, if given the opportunity, they would continue spending time working from home.**

COVID-19 has provided the opportunity to test the implementation of policies and approaches that were introduced relatively slowly prior to the pandemic, WFH being one example. Although WFH was understood by our respondents as the greatest benefit to home-life (from those options given to them), research suggests that in the United States, highly educated, high-income and white workers were more likely to be able to shift to WFH and enjoy it (Alexander, Adam & Karel 2021). Additionally, Galanti and colleagues found that for those engaging in WFH, self-leadership and autonomy were positively associated with productivity and engagement (2021). In other words, those who were given the opportunity to work from home often found they were more productive and engaged because of the self-leadership and autonomy it afforded. However, family-work conflict and social isolation were not affected, or mitigated, by this newfound independence and productivity. As such, WFH is available to, and enjoyed most by, wealthier people and families with more stable employment. Among our respondents, people mentioned that

**“Making a home-office was stressful and expensive”**

**“[I disliked] being at home all the time and having no separation from work”**

**“Losing dining room to ‘home office’ and not eating meals at the table as a result [was disliked]”**

**“Working from home is great...without the kids”**

### **Exercise at home**

The AIFS found that 57% of Australians were doing some form of exercise during the main lockdown in 2020. In fact, one benefit of WFH was the ability to do more exercise (Baxter et al.,

2020). However, only 35% of respondents said they would now be more likely to exercise at home. Some stated that

**“I don't like to be stuck at home, [I dislike] not going to the gym”**

While others felt that the loss of the gym was a good thing, yet out-of-home exercise was still necessary.

**“We exercise together outdoors walking attending [the] local park. No longer at paid gyms.”**

**“We now only go out as a complete family for exercise.”**

### **Spending my money in different ways**

Many predicted that there would be a big shift in spending habits to more values and essentials-based spending, with consumers becoming more mindful of their spending and trading down (Arora et al., 2020). Despite this international research, ABS found that 7 in 10 expected their household finances to stay the same, while almost one in five (18%) expected them to improve and one in eight (12%) expected them to get worse (ABS 2021). Among our respondents, 60% said they were spending their money in different ways. This included:

**“[Learning] how to find other ways to save money e.g doing workouts online”**

**“Working from home and avoiding the commute”**

**“I now budget my money”**

While others said they now

**“worry/focus on money and covering living expenses”**

Or that

**“Money and financial success now seems less relevant”**

### **Spending time with my family/friends**

Despite more time at home, opinions were evenly split about the statement ‘I had more time to spend with family and friends’: 34% disagreed and 34% agreed. During the early stages of the pandemic, the AIFS found that 93% made an effort to connect (Carroll et al., 20220). However, as lockdowns have continued and some have become fatigued with restrictions, connecting has become more difficult. Some said

**“My partner works 100% from home now, this makes it difficult for the children to have friends over”**

**“Friend catch ups via zoom - didn't really work as well. Miss my dinners and coffees with friends”**

**“Very hard to know how to manage the relationship [when people feel differently about COVID-19]”**

**“I have lost connections with close friends”**

**“I don't like being unable to visit close friends interstate. I don't like not being able to hug people. I don't like how sanitised interactions with people have become.”**

**“People keep to themselves more / stay within their own homes with their own families. As a single parent, I feel more isolated and find that there are fewer catch-ups with friends”**

Despite this, exploring digital technologies to connect has been one of the most notable outcomes of the pandemic, with 62% stating a desire to continue connecting with people through digital means. Relying on digital technology for news, entertainment, education, communication and remote work has forced a digital transformation. This was especially true in older generations. Research from the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) shows that the number of people aged 75 and over using social media and emails to connect doubled (from 18% to 41% and 36% to 81%, respectively). The ACMA also reported that for the general population, 74% of Australian adults used five or more communication services in the 6 months leading up to June 2020.

### **Holidaying and spending time in nature**

For many, the prospect of a holiday still seems out of reach. The effect of continuing restrictions and loss of income, fear associated with travel and an inability to plan, led 60% of respondents to agree they would be more likely to holiday closer to home. Respondents stated

**“Due to uncertainties and fear of travel, we have been less likely to plan trips away to decompress, have fun and catch up with extended family or friends that live outside our immediate community. We have become more insular.”**

**“[I dislike being] unable to plan my holidays with certainty.”**

**“We are doing more activities locally because we are not saving to go on a big holiday.”**

Researchers suggested that the effects of the pandemic might heighten environmental awareness, especially as lockdowns reduce access to city amenities (Rousseau & Deschacht 2020). In accordance with this, 48% of people agreed that they would be more likely to spend time in nature because of/since the pandemic. This was supported by statements such as

**“I have tried to incorporate more environmentally friendly packaging and started recycling Soft Plastics through Red-Cycle Program”**

**“More exercise happening in nature close to home”**

**“I have looked inwards more and also at what is happening in the world with climate change. We have started to grow vegetables and fruit and nut trees, and have a few chooks, to try having a bit of self-sufficiency.”**

### **Mental health, communication and the community**

Communication and mental health are intricately linked. Being able to communicate allows you to share how you feel and to ask for what you need. Movements such as ‘R U OK? Day’ rely on conversation as a key mental health intervention. The importance of good communication, and its effect on health outcomes has been demonstrated repeatedly throughout the pandemic (Reddy & Gupta 2020). Communication has often been consigned to online realms and when it is face-to-face outside the home, verbal cues can be impacted by masks. This has been especially impactful for deaf and hard of hearing people who are now facing further communication barriers (Deaf Victoria 2020). While some research has shown that isolation and lack of communication increases suspicion between groups, other work has shown that the trust people have between their neighbours can attenuate perceived COVID-19 risk (Cruwys et al., 2021). While households with multiple people at home were predicted to need better communication to manage the experience, those who live alone or had little opportunity to communicate with others were predicted to experience the effects of isolation. Among our respondents, 24% agreed that they were better at communicating, while 28% disagreed.

Despite this apparent reduction in communication skills for some, people have reported a newfound awareness and/or appreciation for their mental health.

### **58% of respondents said they had a different appreciation/understanding of their mental health**

Mental health and wellbeing has played a prominent role in the pandemic, especially as it aligns with a series of reforms taking place in the mental health, wellbeing and suicide prevention sectors. This has brought mental health into the public discussion. Respondents commented that

**“[I] had to come to terms with mental health problems and accept them”**

**“[I] had the time to address some long standing mental health issues”**

While some changes may not persist, the significant changes to mental health and circumstances has led 54% to re-assess their, or their family’s, priorities. This led some to state that they

**“place a higher priority on spending more time with my family and my friends”**

**“I now prioritise mental health”**

The importance of neighbours and the community has become more prominent during the pandemic. While confined to the home, neighbours became a source of support for many. Respondents mentioned that they were

**“Currently talking to the neighbours more regularly”**

**“[I like] having an excuse to check in on elderly friends and neighbours”**

**“[we do a] regular happy hour with neighbour”**

Among survey respondents, 50% said they think differently about their role living in the community. This aligns with other loneliness research Relationships Australia has conducted, exploring the connection between neighbours and mental health (Cruwys et al., 2021). Evaluations of Relationships Australia’s Neighbour Day Campaign have found enduring evidence of greater social connection, increased wellbeing and reduced loneliness following involvement with neighbours, especially during the pandemic. This is due to greater perceived access to neighbours’ support and a reduced sense of loneliness.

### Enduring changes to relationships

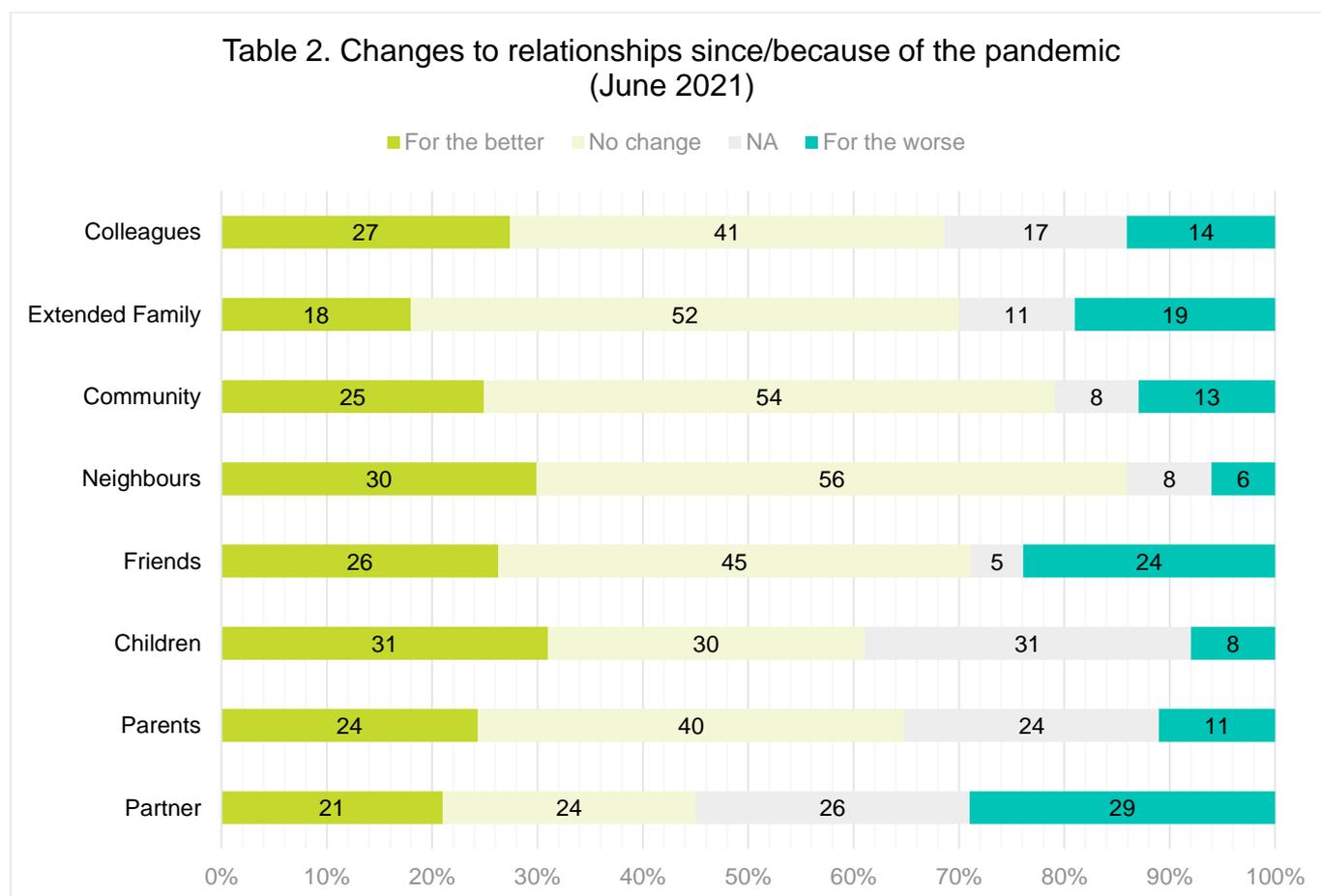
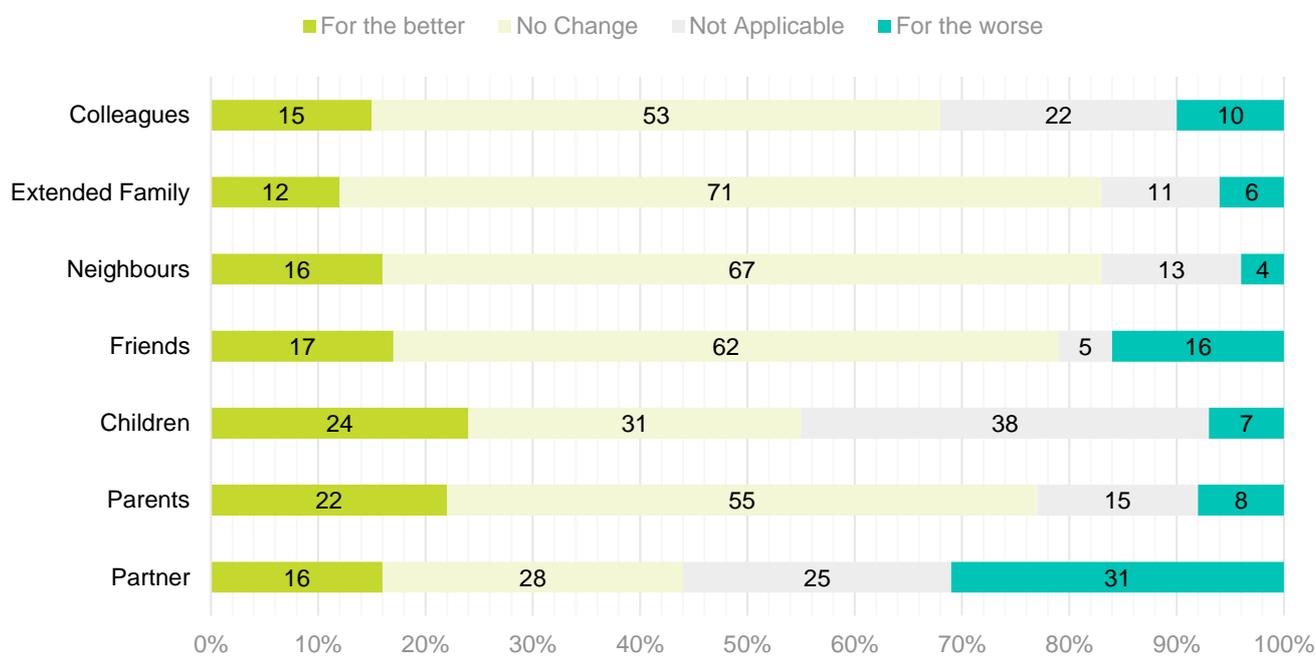


Table 3. Changes to relationships during the COVID-19 restrictions (May 2020)



The longer the pandemic has lasted, the more likely people have been to experience changes in their relationships as a result. Table 4 demonstrates that people were more likely to experience 'no change' in 2020 than in 2021. This suggests that the ongoing effects of COVID-19 restrictions have been a source of relationship change. As in 2020, it was our relationships with those traditionally closest to us (partner, children, parents and friends) that were most likely to change.

Table 4. Relationship changes - no change (May 2020 versus June 2021)

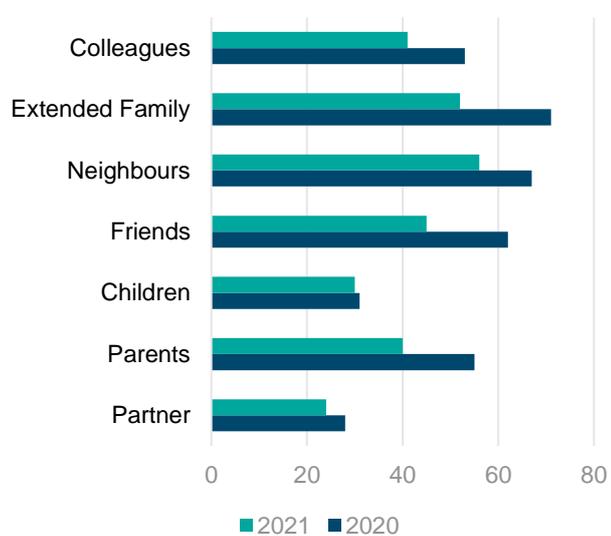
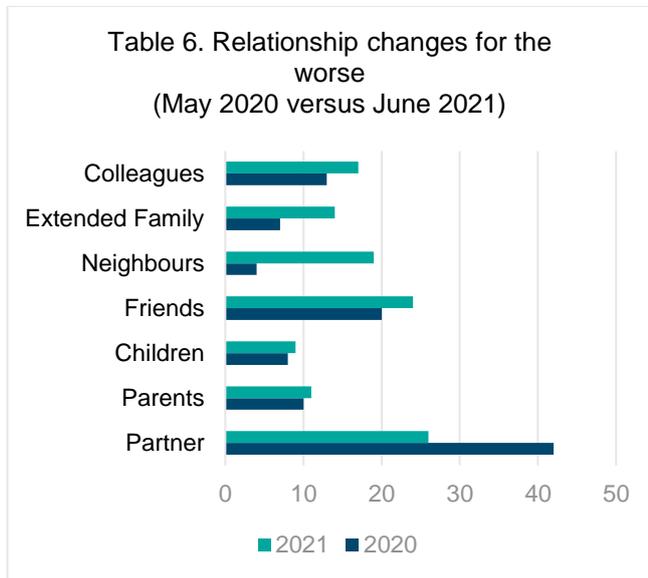
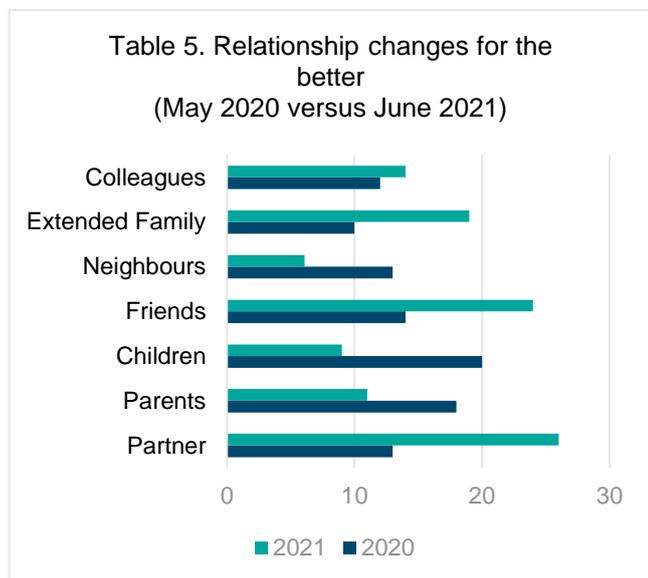


Table 2 demonstrates that in 2021, relationships with our children, neighbours and colleagues were most likely to see improvement, while relationships with friends, partners and extended family were more likely to have changed for the worse. Despite this, Table 5 demonstrates that compared to last year's results, many have found that their relationship to their partner, friends and extended family has actually improved.

Notably, across both years, relationships with partners were more likely to be changed by the pandemic, leading to both positive and negative outcomes. In our 2020 survey, we found that 42% of people saw their relationship with their partner get worse in the first few months of lockdown. This finding was widely publicised. Table 6 shows a reduction in the amount of people reporting that their relationship with their partner 'got worse' as

a result of COVID-19 (33% in 2021 versus 42% in 2020). In fact, in 2021 21% reported that their relationship with their partner improved versus 16% in 2020.



If you would like to be involved with more research that Relationships Australia is conducting on the effects of the pandemic on relationships, please complete our [Families Un-locked research study](#), run in partnership with Griffith University, and the University of Worcester UK and Relate UK.

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