

COVID-19 and its Effects on Relationships

May/June 2020 Survey: What effects will the easing of COVID-19 restrictions have on people's relationships and mental health?

Introduction

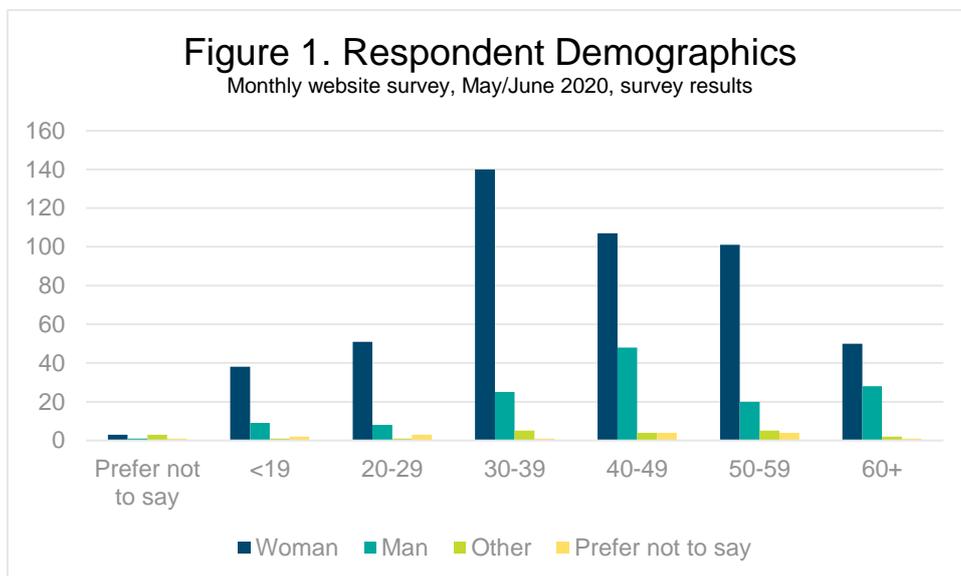
The Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis has caused great societal upheaval and an unprecedented change to the way we live, work and socialise. In response, Relationships Australia is conducting a series of short surveys to explore how people's working lives, social lives and relationships have been affected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

This survey is the third in the series. It investigates the recent lifting of restrictions across the country, exploring how this has, and will, affect people's close relationships and the anxieties and excitement associated with returning to 'normal life'.

Key Findings

- Despite 38% of respondents suggesting that they were able to avoid sicknesses in the past, there is heightened anxiety about catching COVID-19.
- This led to 62% of respondents feeling more scared or anxious visiting crowded places now than in the past.
- As well as 60% of respondents feeling annoyed when seeing others gathering in a big group.
- Even when COVID-19 is managed, 9% of respondents said they would never again feel comfortable in crowds.
- Similarly, 10.3% of respondents said that even when COVID-19 is managed, they would no longer feel comfortable attending food and entertainment related events. This included things such as the cinema (2.4%), eating out (1.5%), markets (2%) or clubbing (1.6%).
- Despite this, 48% of respondents felt comfortable going to large indoor shopping centres and 67% felt comfortable visiting cafes.
- Others were less anxious, with 45% of respondents saying they would feel comfortable doing everything they did pre-COVID in 1 year. Another 34% said it would take 6-12 months, whereas 19% thought they would only need 1-2 months to return to normal activities.
- 60% of respondents said that they feel the same as other people in their social circles about lifting restrictions, while 29% were less eager and only 11% felt more eager to lift restrictions.
- 51% of respondents think lifting restrictions will have a positive effect on their close relationships, 10% foresee a negative effect and 37% think it will have no effect.
- Those who were less eager to lift restrictions were more likely to foresee a negative effect on relationships, while those who were more eager to lift restrictions were most likely to predict the positive effects of lifting restrictions.

Findings



665 people responded to the Relationships Australia May/June survey, which explored how people felt about the government lifting COVID-19 related restrictions and how this may effect their close relationships. The majority of respondents identified as women (74%), 21 percent identified as men, 3 percent as other and 2 percent selected 'prefer not to say' (figure 1).

50 percent of respondents were aged between 30-49. A further 32 percent were aged 50+ (figure 1). 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.

We received responses from every Australian state and territory. These matched the geographic population statistics of Australia to within 5 percent (ABS 2019). As such, some of this analysis will focus on state-by-state perceptions about the lifting of restrictions.

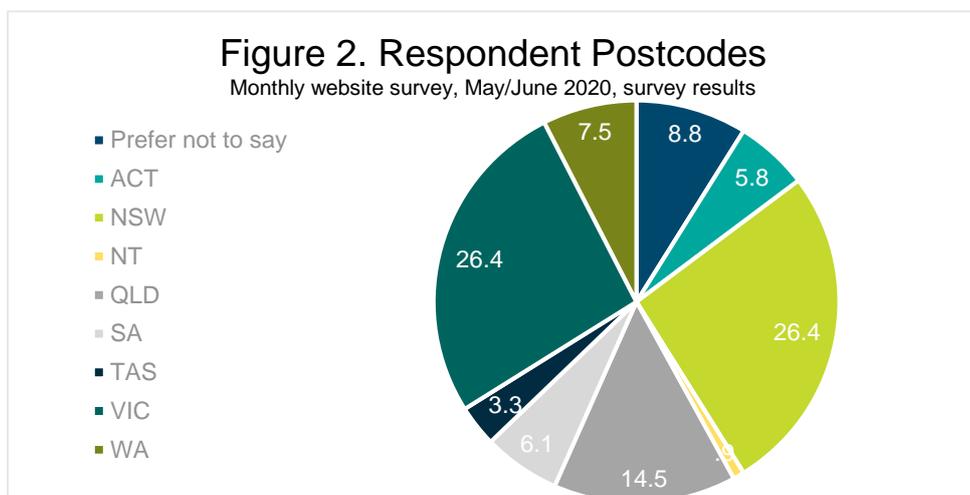
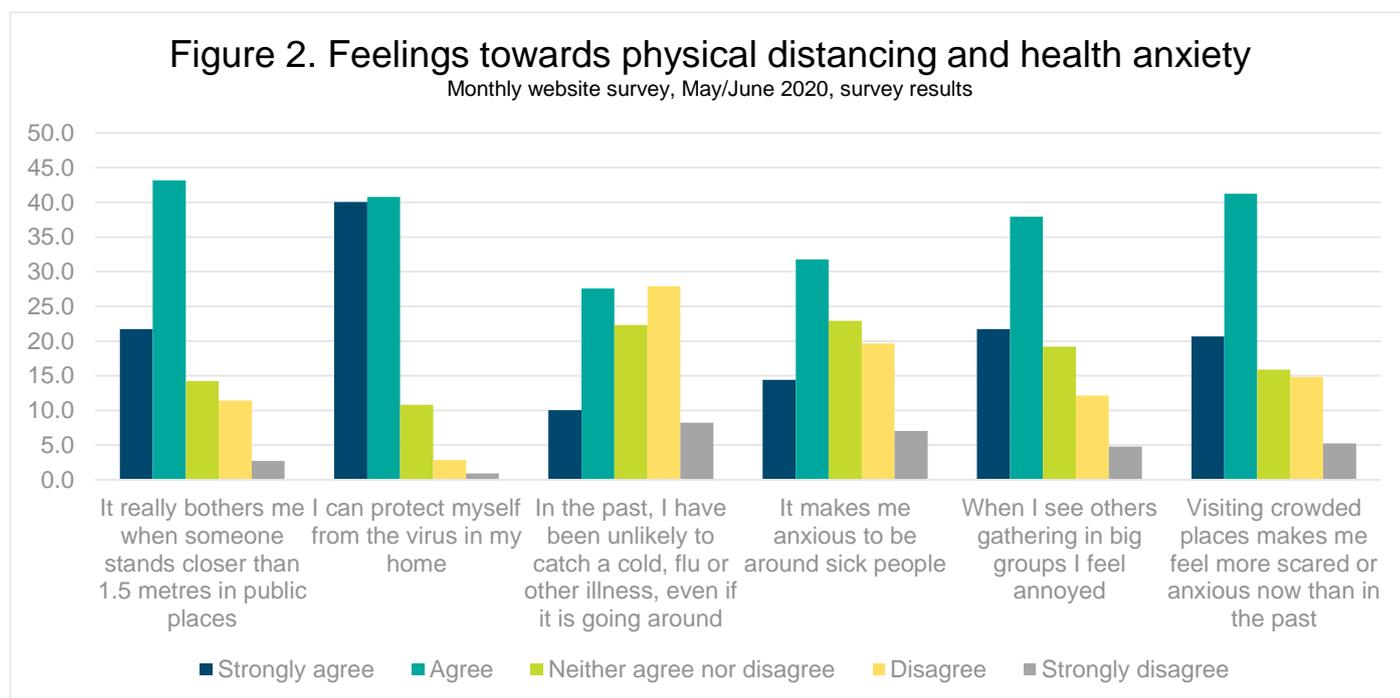


Figure 3 explores a series of questions relating to people's feelings towards physical distancing measures and health anxiety. Figure 3 illustrates that, while 81 percent of people believed they could protect themselves from the virus in their own home, 62 percent of people felt more scared or anxious visiting crowded places now than in the past. Similarly, 60 percent of people felt annoyed when seeing others gathering in a big group. This suggests people have developed a high-level of anxiety and fear associated with public places and gathering when compared with their own homes.



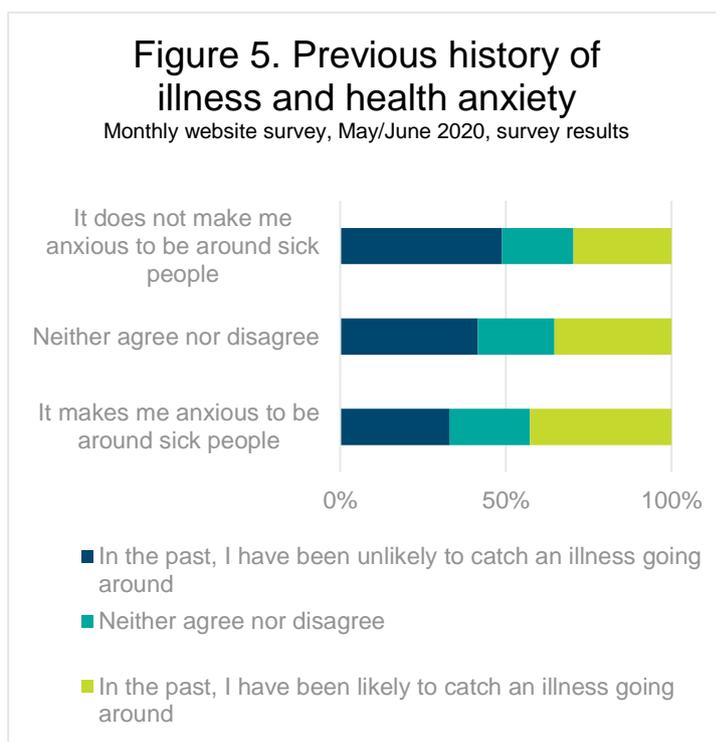
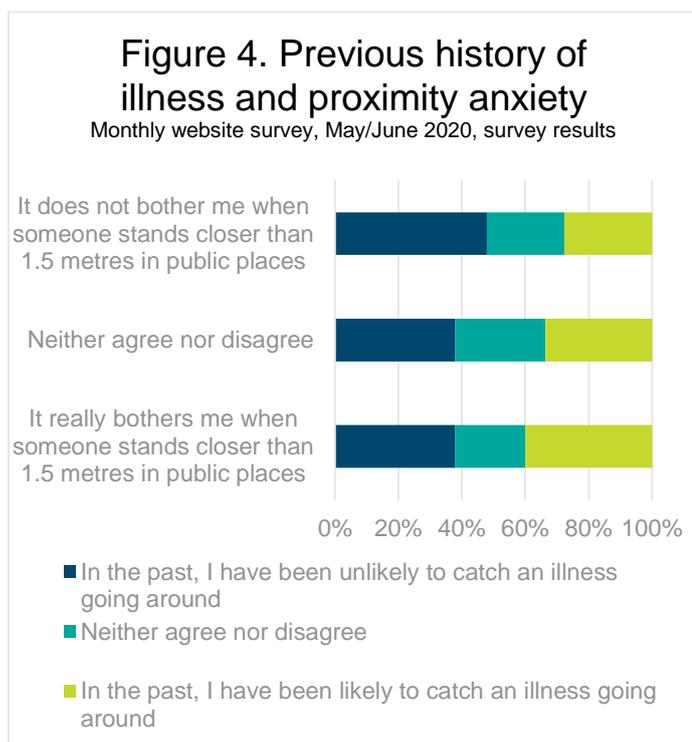
The more generalised health anxiety questions produced less polarising results. Health anxiety refers to the fear associated with having a severe health condition and a person’s willingness to believe that they are made easily unwell (Salkovskis et al. 2002). The first, third and fourth questions in figure 3 employed COVID-19 related health advice and health anxiety research questions to understand how people’s generalised anxieties about health may have been amplified during the recent months.¹

Health anxiety affects approximately 5.7 percent of the Australian population across the lifespan (Sunderland 2013). Figure 2 illustrates that our respondents demonstrated a balanced response to their likelihood of becoming sick in the past. 38 percent felt that they were unlikely to catch a cold, flu or other illness if it was going around, 22 percent were indifferent and 36 percent disagreed (figure 3)². In contrast, in current circumstances, 46 percent of people agreed (32% agreed, 14% strongly agreed) that being around sick people makes them anxious. Similarly, 65 percent of respondents were ‘really bothered’ by people who stood closer than 1.5 metres in public places. This suggests that despite a majority (38%) feeling they were able to avoid sicknesses in the past, there is heightened anxiety about catching COVID-19.

¹ It should be noted that these questions have been adapted from the original source and only include a small sample from a larger questionnaire which would more reliably detect health anxiety.

² Please note, all questions have the option for respondents to not provide an answer. As such, percentages may not equate to 100.00.

Figure 4 and 5 investigate this phenomenon further. We see that people who are illness-prone are more likely to be upset by people not following physical distancing rules in public spaces (figure 4) and more likely to feel anxious around sick people (figure 5). This suggests that while there is a generalised increase in anxiety about Coronavirus, people who believe they are made easily ill are more likely to feel upset about the flouting of COVID-19 physical distancing advice.

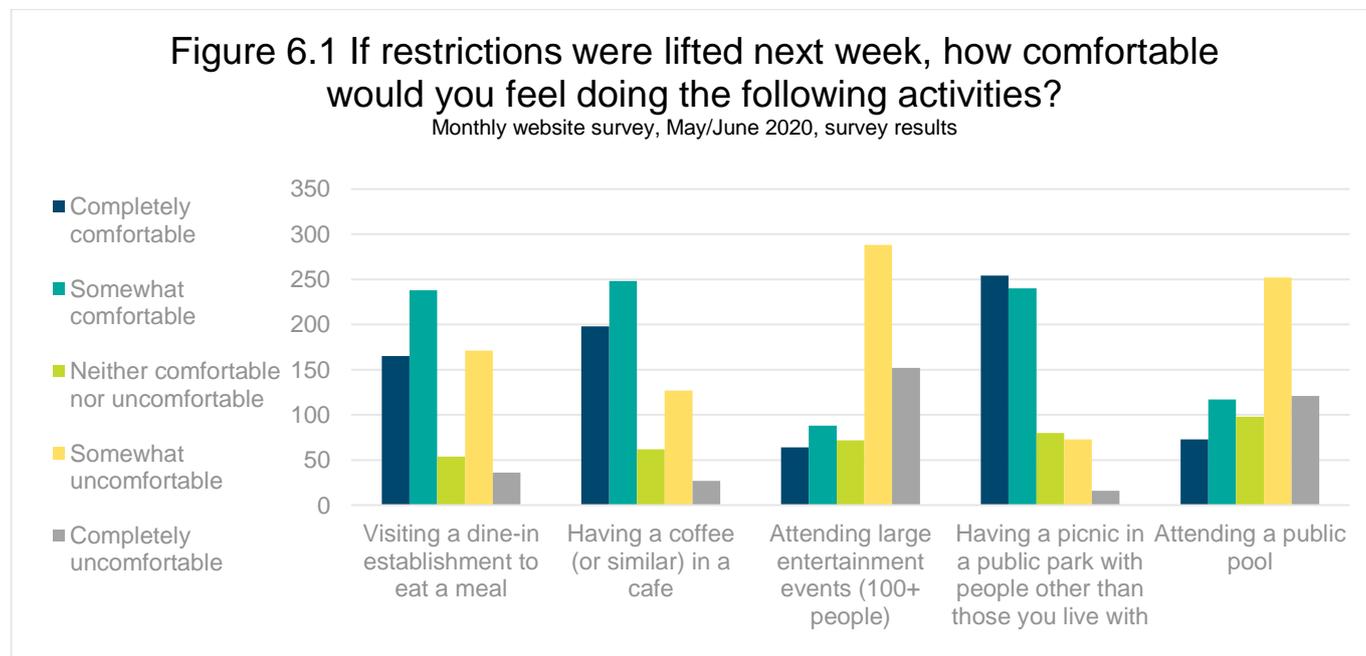


Figures 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 include responses to a series of questions which explored people’s comfort levels around the easing of restrictions on everyday activities. Respondents were asked to rate their comfort levels if restrictions on these activities were lifted next week. Figure 6.1 demonstrates that respondents felt more comfortable with the idea of visiting a café than a restaurant. Only 40 percent of respondents said they would feel comfortable dining in at a restaurant, while 67 percent would feel comfortable having a coffee (or similar) in a café. Similarly, having a picnic in a park with people other than those you live with was deemed the most comforting of all activities. 38 percent felt ‘completely comfortable’ and 36 percent were ‘somewhat comfortable’ (figure 6.1).

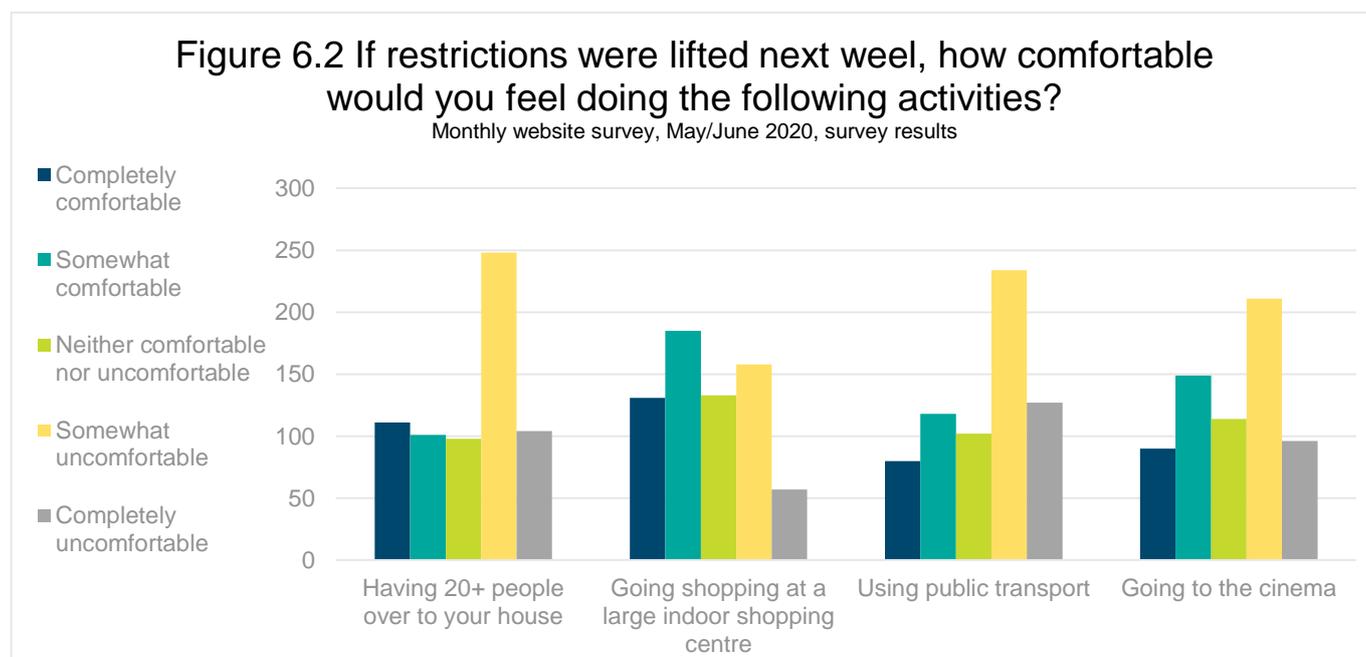
In contrast, crowds and large gatherings felt much less safe to most respondents. 66 percent of people said they felt either ‘somewhat uncomfortable’ (43%) or ‘completely uncomfortable’ (23%) at the idea of attending a large entertainment event with 100+ people (figure 6.1). Similarly, having 20+ people over to one’s house was deemed ‘somewhat uncomfortable’ (37%) or ‘completely uncomfortable’ (16%) by respondents (figure 6.2).

Interestingly, despite a widespread mistrust of crowds (which is reflected further in figure 7), 48 percent felt comfortable going to a large indoor shopping centre (figure 6.2). This discrepancy, as well as that seen between cafes and restaurants, could be due to people’s continued use of these services throughout COVID-19 restrictions. As people continued to access supermarkets and stores,

as well as purchase takeaway items from cafes, during the strictest periods of restrictions, there appears to be less fear associated with these activities.

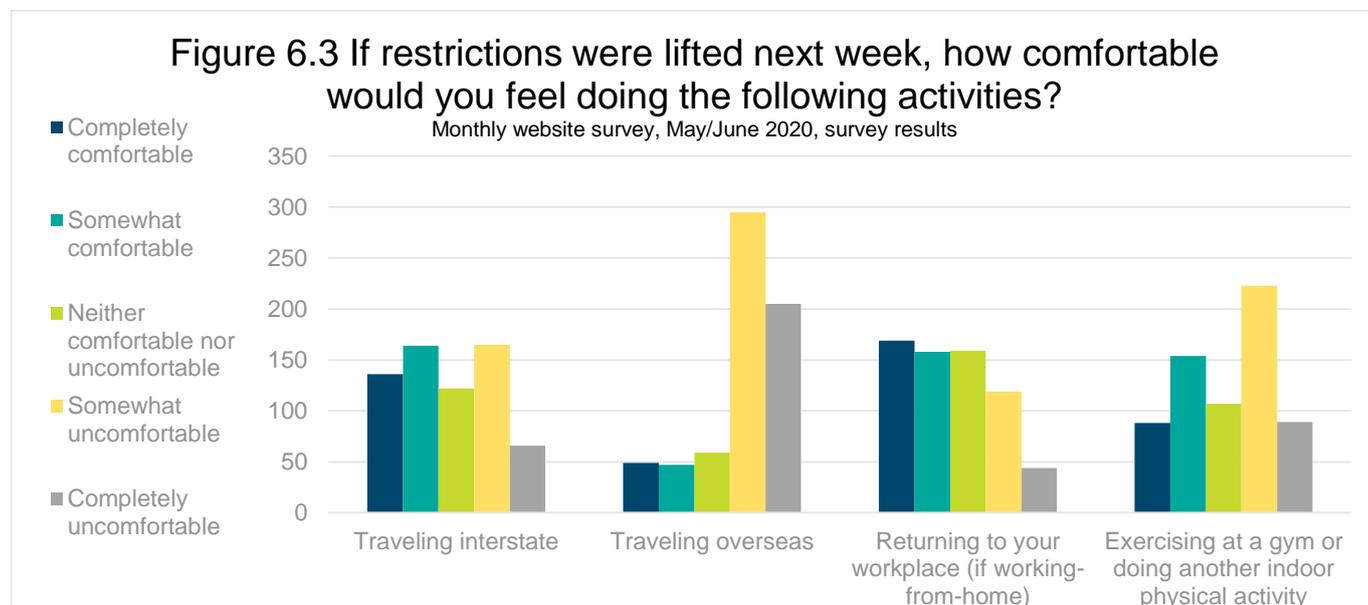


Despite the easing of restrictions, attending a public pool (figure 6.1) or exercising in a gym (figure 6.3) also remains an uncomfortable prospect for a large proportion of respondents. 56 percent of respondents felt uncomfortable at the prospect of attending a public pool, while 47 percent were discomfited by the idea of attending the gym.



Attending the cinema was also still considered an uncomfortable prospect (at varying levels) by many (46%) (figure 6.2). The concept of travel, especially international travel, was deemed the least

favourable activity, with 75 percent of respondents saying it would be uncomfortable (figure 6.3). Traveling interstate received a more balanced response, with 45 percent saying they felt varying levels of comfort with the idea, and 36 percent saying they felt uncomfortable (figure 6.3). The concept of travel in the future will be explored further in figure 7.



Returning to work may prove difficult for some, with 26 percent of people saying they would feel uncomfortable at this idea (figure 6.2), and a further 35 percent feeling ‘somewhat uncomfortable’, and 19 percent ‘completely uncomfortable’ taking public transport (figure 6.1).

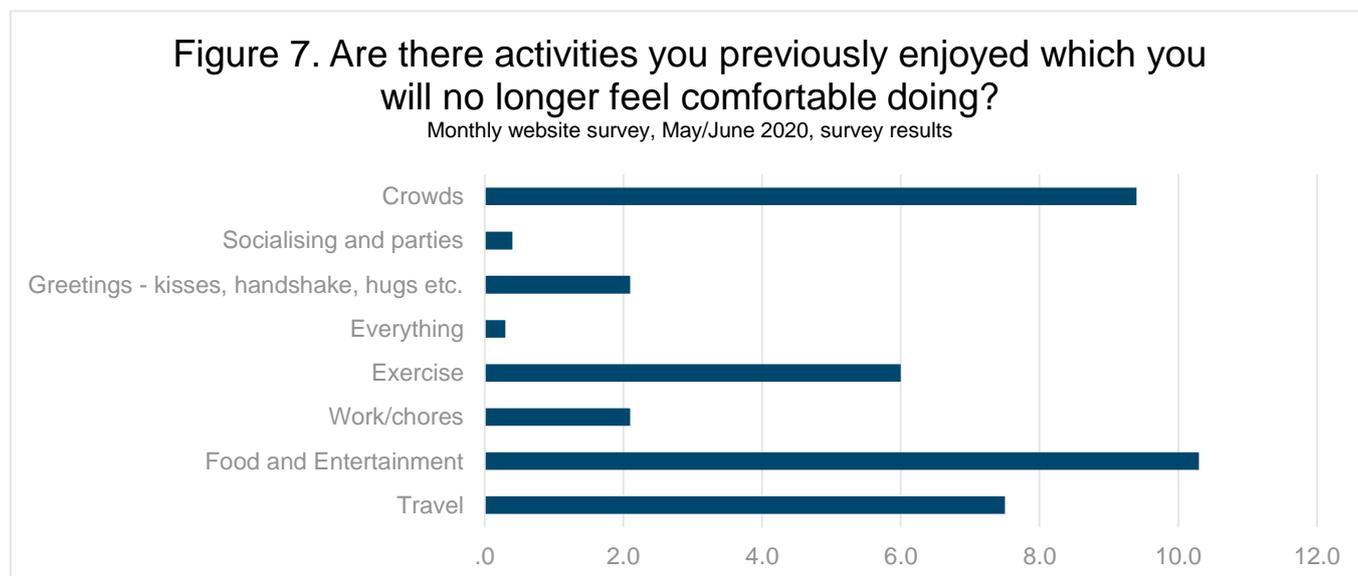


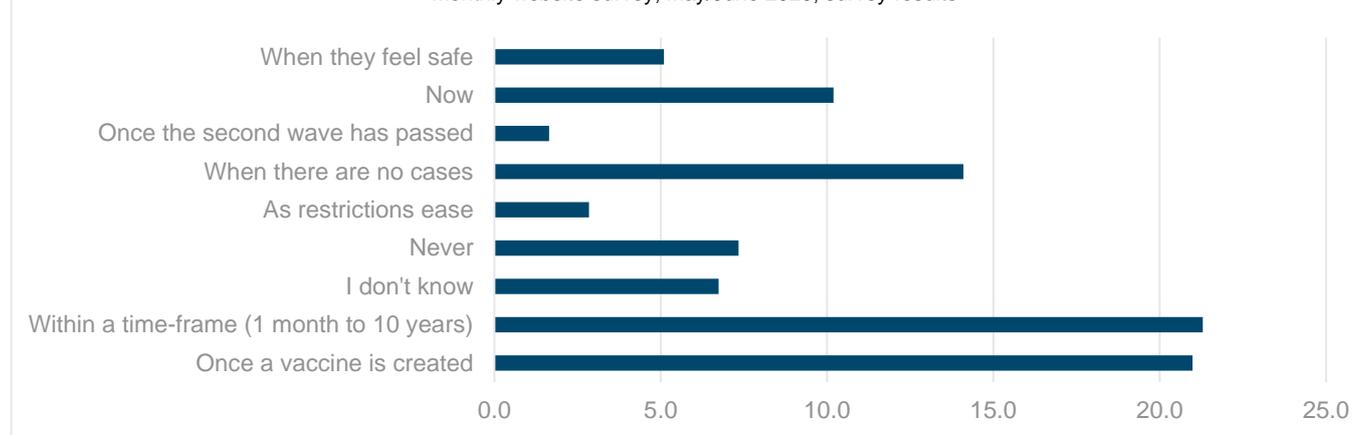
Figure 7 presents a summarised version of the qualitative responses people provided about activities they would no-longer feel comfortable doing once COVID-19 is ‘being managed effectively’. 9 percent of respondents said they would no longer feel comfortable in crowds. A further 10.3 percent said they would no longer feel comfortable attending food and entertainment related events. This included things such as the cinema (2.4%), eating out (1.5%), markets (2%)

or clubbing (1.6%). Further to this, 7.5 percent of people said that even when COVID-19 was managed, they would no longer feel comfortable traveling, which included all air travel (1%), cruises (1%) and international travel (5.5%).

Finally, while a few respondents said they would no longer feel comfortable doing *anything* they previously did, 43 percent said they did not think there was any activity they previously enjoyed doing that they would no longer feel comfortable doing.

Figure 8. When (if ever) do you think you will feel comfortable doing everything you did pre-COVID-19?

Monthly website survey, May/June 2020, survey results

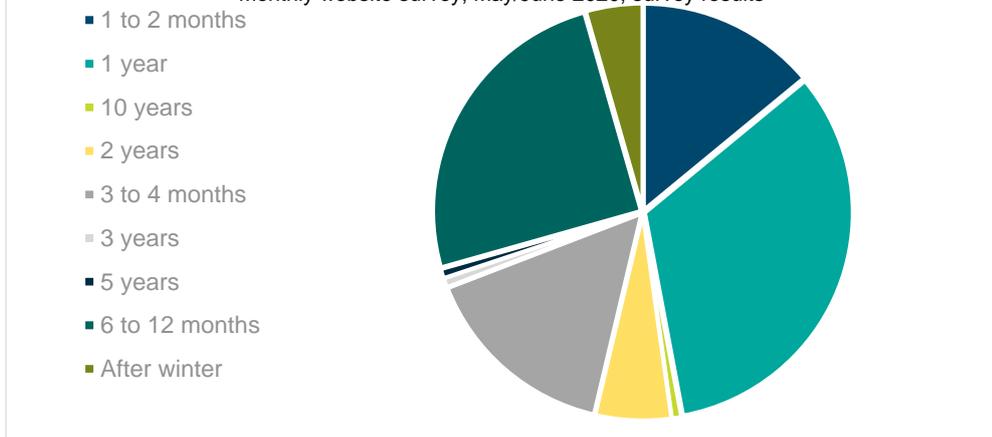


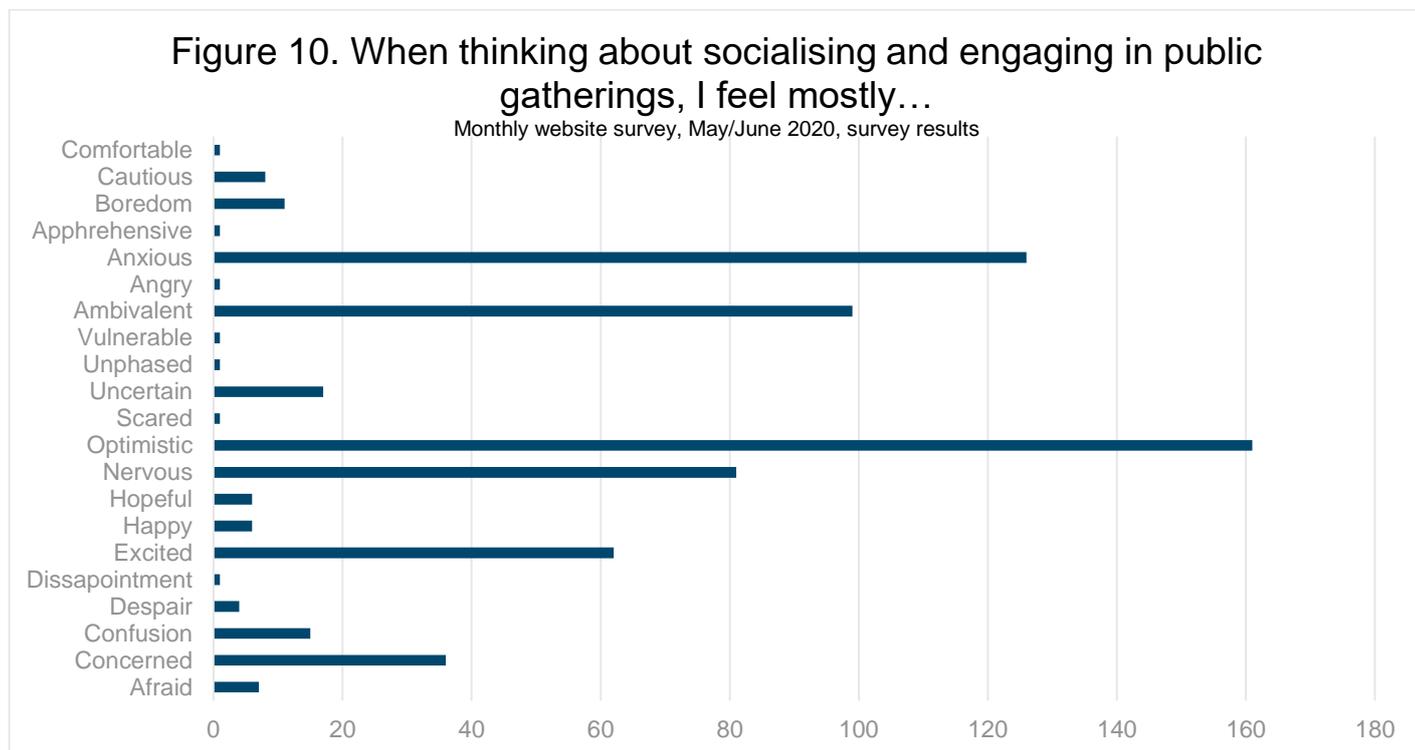
When asked when respondents may feel comfortable returning to everything they did pre-COVID-19, responses varied widely. Figure 8 presents a summarised version of the qualitative responses people provided. While many could provide an arbitrary timeframe (21.3%), others felt that their comfort would rely on medical advancements like the creation of a vaccine (21%), or a lack of active cases worldwide (14%). This suggests that despite the relaxing restrictions, many face their own anxieties associated with returning to their social and working lives

Figure 9 looks more closely at these timeframes, illustrating that a large majority (45%) felt they would feel comfortable doing everything they did pre-COVID in 1 year. Following this, 34 percent said 6-12 months and 19 percent said 1-2 months. This, as well as data in other graphs, suggests that among our respondents there were two camps; those who are starting to feel comfortable 'returning to normal', and those who remain quite anxious.

Figure 9. When (if ever) do you think you will feel comfortable doing everything you did pre-COVID-19?

Monthly website survey, May/June 2020, survey results





This is extrapolated further in figures 10 and 11. Figure 10 demonstrates that the two most prevalent feelings associated with socialising and engaging in public gatherings post-COVID were optimism (24%) and anxiety (19%), which were closely followed by ambivalence (15%), nervousness (12%) and excitement (9%).

Figure 11 also illustrates these feelings. While many had concerns about their own (13.8%) and other’s health (14%), others were excited despite these concerns. For example, 9 percent said that while they were excited to have restrictions ease, they were concerned about the possibility of a second or third wave of the virus.

Those who were excited about easing restrictions, but concerned about a second wave were both concerned for their own safety as well as having a general mistrust of the community’s ability to ‘be responsible’. Those who said they enjoyed isolation cited reasons like a slower pace of life, less requirement to travel to work and more time with family. Others said they spent more time socialising due to the popularity of online videoconferencing programs. Some people’s concern was caused by the so-called ‘symptom-free carriers’, where the lack of restrictions meant their choice to socialise could lead to future outbreaks.

Personal health concerns could include references to people’s physical and mental health. Many (31%) said socialising was good for their mental health and therefore the opportunity to socialise would be beneficial to their health. Despite this, some felt the anxiety around catching the virus would affect their mental health while socialising for some time. Others were concerned they would become ill and then unable to provide for their family or be unable to afford the healthcare. Finally, 3 percent felt that isolation had led to greater community cohesion and as such, the world will change for the better, including better health and hygiene standards.

Figure 11. What are your initial thoughts about lifting restrictions?

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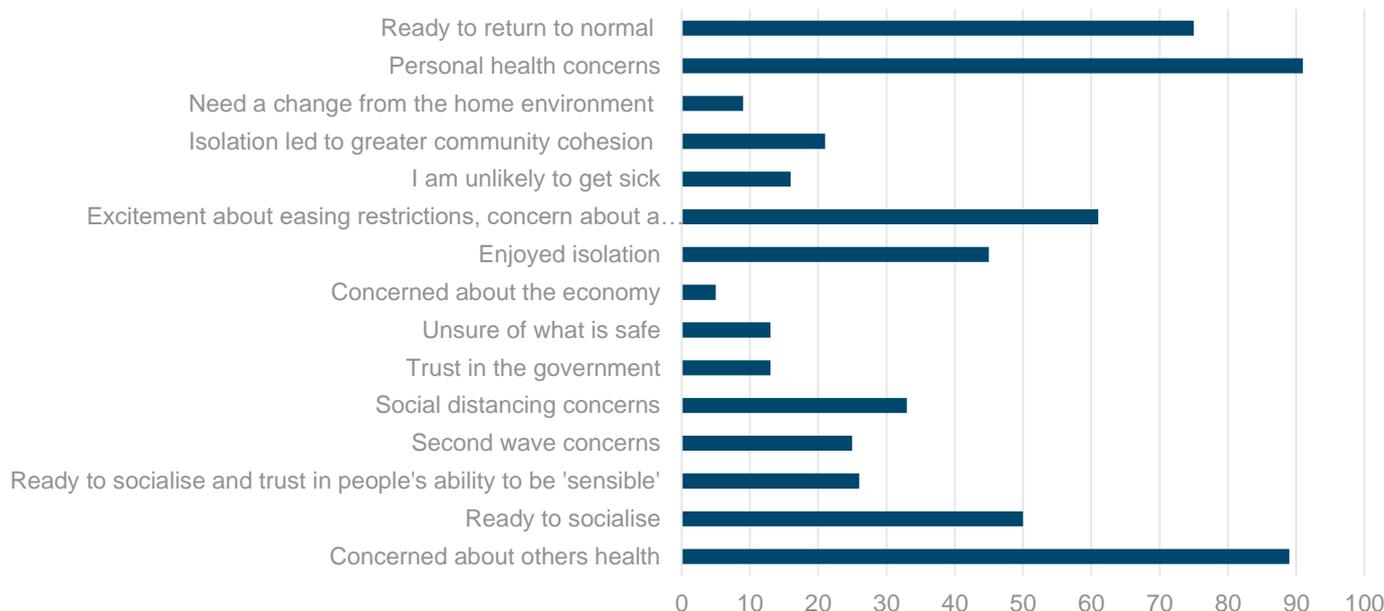
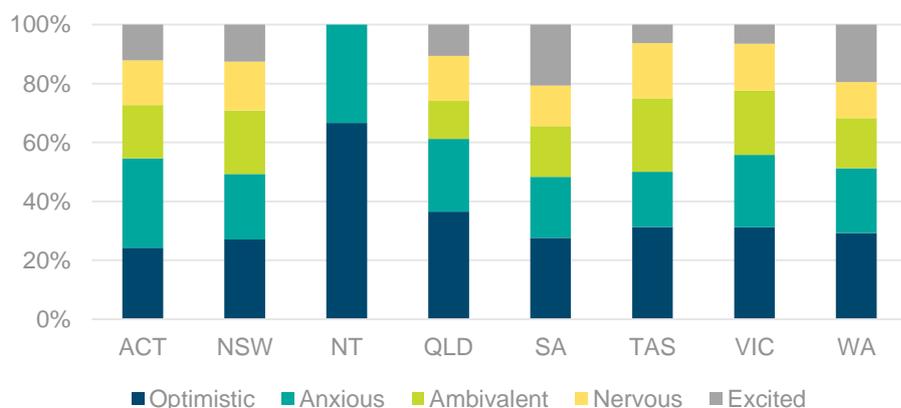


Figure 12 demonstrates that people’s location (and presumably the severity of the virus in their area) affected their feelings towards the imminent opportunities to socialise. As the Northern Territory has had the least cases of all Australian states, it showed the most optimism about lifting restrictions. Interestingly, while Victoria and New South Wales have had significantly more cases than other states, respondents showed similar levels of anxiety, optimism, ambivalence, nervousness and excitement across the board.

While it is difficult to make predictions about why this might be the case, the qualitative responses provide some insight. For most, and despite the concerns mentioned in figure 11, many expressed a desire to return to some resemblance of normal. Many exhibited contradicting desires, to begin to ‘move on’, whilst also understanding the danger still present.

Figure 12. Thoughts on socialising based on location

Monthly website survey, May/June 2020, survey results



Finally, we asked two questions to understand how people compared their own feelings about lifting restrictions, against their friends, family and colleagues. Figure 13 illustrates that despite the contradicting feelings seen throughout this analysis, 60 percent thought that they felt the same as people with whom they have close relationships. 29 percent reported that they were less eager and only 11 percent said they were more eager than their friends, family or colleagues.

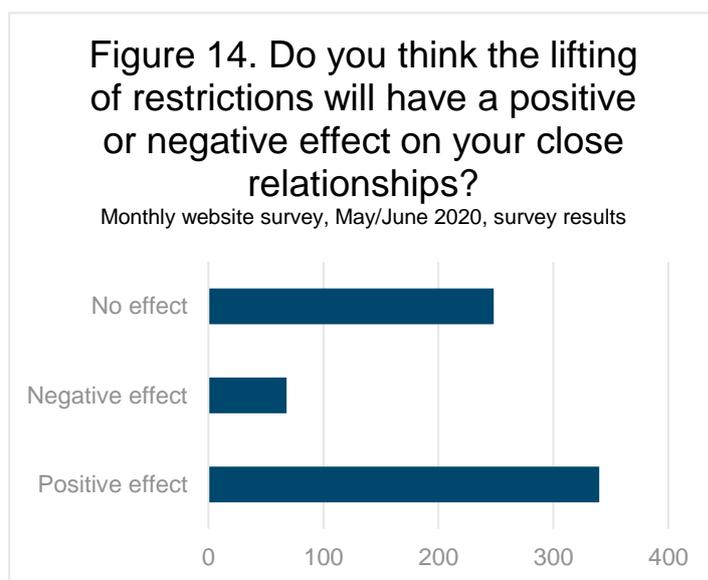
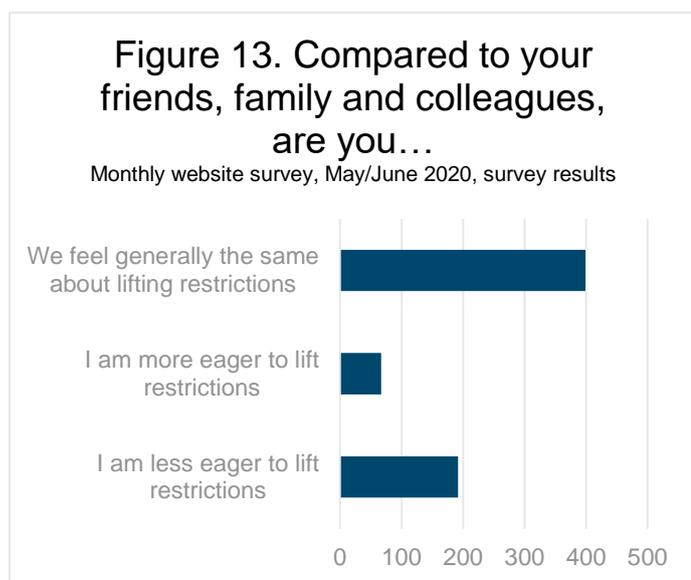
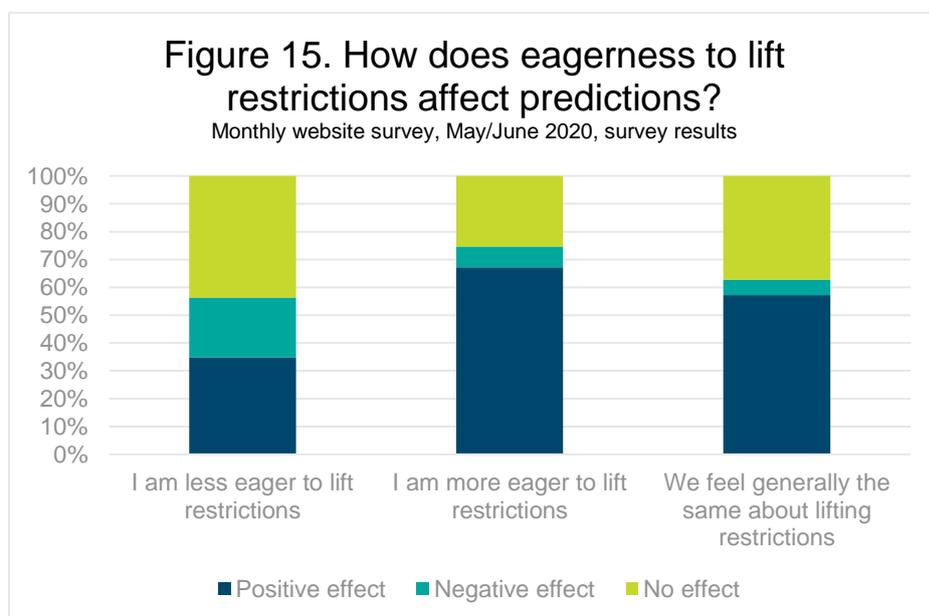


Figure 14 demonstrates that 51 percent think lifting restrictions will have a positive effect, 10 percent foresee a negative effect on their close relationships and 37 percent think it will have no effect.

Figure 15 explores this further. As expected, those who are less eager to lift restrictions were more likely to foresee a negative effect on relationships, while those who were more eager to lift restrictions were most likely to predict the positive effects of lifting restrictions. Again, this could be related to the pervasive feeling that while it may be somewhat risky, the social benefits of interaction would outweigh the risks of infection for many.



References

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