

Health problems arising from social disconnection

March 22 2016



They made global headlines by proving the importance of social groups in retirement, and now Australian researchers are transforming the lives of young adults who feel socially isolated.

Professor Catherine Haslam and colleagues from The University of Queensland's School of Psychology have spent three years researching an intervention to address [health problems](#) arising from social disconnection.

"Our program, [Groups 4 Health](#), is designed to address the fact that many health problems are more likely to present in people who are socially isolated," Professor Haslam said.

"If we can empower people with the skills and resources to develop membership in meaningful social groups, that sense of being part of something bigger makes them more fulfilled and resilient."

Professor Haslam and co-authors Dr Tegan Cruwys, Professor Alex Haslam, Dr Genevieve Dingle and Melissa Xue-Ling Chang studied 158 [young adults](#) reporting at least mild clinical signs of depression and anxiety.

One group completed the Groups 4 Health program while a [control group](#) was monitored over a six-month period.

"Of those who completed the program, 68.5 per cent reported feeling less lonely, 68.5 per cent reported lower stress, and 64.8 per cent were less depressed," Professor Haslam said.

"While participants in the control group reported no improvement to their circumstance, the benefits to graduates of Groups 4 Health were maintained six months after the program had ended."

Groups 4 Health participants were first taught about the health benefits of social groups through exploring their social group network and ways they would like it to function in the future.

Facilitators helped people to identify and strengthen existing valuable groups, establish new social group connections, and troubleshoot any difficulties that arose in the process.

Dr Cruwys said the sense of social identity derived from group

membership was central to self-concept and life choices, perhaps even more so than idiosyncratic traits or personal identities.

"When internalised in our sense of self, groups have a big impact on the way we think, feel and act," she said.

"Social identities also provide people with grounding, a purpose in life, and a sense of belonging that has the capacity to make them stronger, particularly when they are vulnerable or challenged."

The research on social identity and health is published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*.

Earlier this year the same researchers, along with Dr Niklas Steffens and Professor Jolanda Jetten, revealed that retirees who maintained two social groups after six years of retirement had a two per cent chance of death, compared to a 12 per cent chance for those who lost both [social groups](#).

The team is finalising a book, *The new psychology of [health](#): Unlocking the social cure*, encompassing these various lines of research.

More information: Catherine Haslam et al. Groups 4 Health: Evidence that a social-identity intervention that builds and strengthens social group membership improves mental health, *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jad.2016.01.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2016.01.010)

Provided by University of Queensland

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