

Good neighbors are good for your health

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Dr James O'Donnell. Credit: Australian National University

Neighborhood relationships and social connections protected against loneliness, depression and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to new research from The Australian National University (ANU). The findings come from a nationally-representative longitudinal survey of more than 3,000 people, conducted over three waves between May and November 2020.

"People generally are much less likely to report symptoms of depression, anxiety and loneliness if they have positive perceptions of their neighborhood [social environments](#)," lead author Dr. James O'Donnell said. "Neighborhood cohesiveness is a really important social glue; it keeps us connected and supports our wellbeing in [everyday life](#) and during a crisis. Everybody needs good neighbors. It is good for your health."

The study, which examined the period prior and during the second COVID-19 lockdown in Melbourne, provides powerful evidence on the mental health impacts of lockdowns.

"During the second lockdown in Melbourne, one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in the world, the association between the neighborhood environment was even stronger, suggesting the protective effects of [neighborhoods](#) were enhanced during lockdown," Dr. O'Donnell said. "The results suggest that during the second lockdown in Melbourne levels of depression increased by an average of 22 percent and levels of loneliness by four percent."

However, the study found if people perceived their neighborhoods as being more cohesive, they were less likely to experience these negative mental health outcomes. "Our study shows [social connections](#) protected against loneliness, depression and anxiety—especially during lockdowns," Dr. O'Donnell said. "Close-knit neighborhoods and neighbors that trust one another, get along well and help each other can provide a really important source of social and psychological support, especially in a crisis such as COVID-19."

Co-author Professor Kate Reynolds said: "Given the way lockdowns shrink physical interactions with friends, colleagues and wider social networks and keep people at home, neighborhoods potentially take on an even more prominent social support role."

The researchers say these findings provide important insights on how governments and communities can better respond to the pandemic.

"Investing in the social infrastructure of local communities and the [social cohesion](#) of the country can protect the social, physical and psychological wellbeing of people both in [daily life](#) and through the crises we face," Professor Reynolds said. "Addressing social cohesion now could provide an important mental health buffer during COVID-19 and beyond."

More information: James O'Donnell et al, The longitudinal effect of COVID-19 infections and lockdown on mental health and the protective effect of neighbourhood social relations, *Social Science & Medicine* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.114821](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.114821)

Provided by Australian National University

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