



## Relationship Indicators

The ongoing effects of  
partnered relationship  
breakdown on our  
mental health, wellbeing  
and future outlook

*“Sorrow is the counterpoint to  
happiness - it helps me recognise and  
appreciate happiness, in myself and  
in others” – Male, 54-65 years*

Special Report



# Who is Relationships Australia?

**Relationships Australia is a federation of community-based, not-for-profit organisations with no religious affiliations. Our services are for all members of the community, regardless of religious belief, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural background or economic circumstances.**

Relationships Australia provides a range of services, including counselling, dispute resolution, children's services, services for victims and perpetrators of family violence, services for older people, and relationship and professional education. We aim to support all people in Australia to live with positive and respectful relationships, and believe that people have the capacity to change how they relate to others.

Relationships Australia conducts research and evaluation to improve our services and inform our advocacy on issues affecting communities in Australia.

## Suggested Citation

Relationships Australia (2024). Relationship Indicators. 'The ongoing effects of partnered relationship breakdown on our connection, wellbeing and future outlook'.

<https://www.relationships.org.au/relationship-indicators/>

## Ethics

This survey obtained ethics approval from the University of New England Human Research Ethics Committee (HE22-087) on 9 June 2022. The research was undertaken in accordance with:

- The Privacy Act (1988) (Cth) and the Australian Privacy Principles contained therein
- The Privacy (Market and Social Research) Code 2014
- The Australian Market and Social Research Society's Code of Professional Practice
- ISO 20252 standards.

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# Relationship Indicators

Relationship Indicators is a national survey into the state of relationships in Australia. The survey was collected in 2022 and the [Full Report](#) was published November 2022. The previously unpublished data examined in this report focuses on the experiences of relationship breakdown that have occurred at any time in people’s lives, but that still affect them today.

## Significant Others

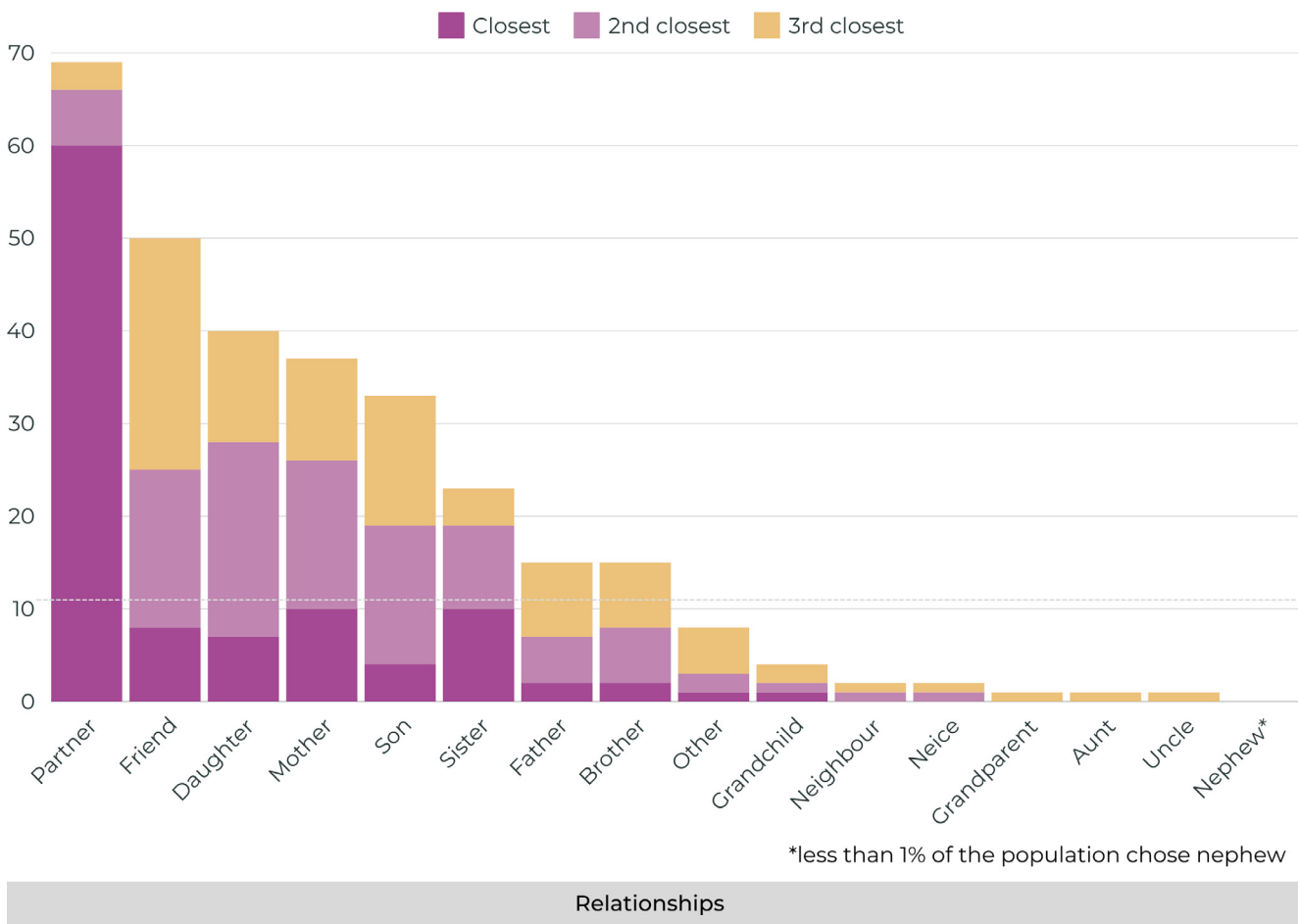
Relationship Indicators sought to expand the traditional understanding of a ‘significant other’. Significant others are often understood to be romantic or sexual partners, who play an important emotional and socially supportive role in people’s lives. The Relationship Indicators survey expanded this definition by asking people to focus on “the most important, meaningful relationship” in their

life. This shifted the focus to the significance of the relationship as opposed to the type of relationship. The survey then explored relationship length, relationship pressures, relationship satisfaction, enjoyment, safety, help-seeking and strategies for coping with relationship distress within this important relationship. The findings from this analysis can be accessed by reading the [Full Report](#).

## Partnered relationships remain a central part of people’s lives

Despite our expanded definition of a ‘significant other’, 60% of Australians chose their partner as the most important person in their life. This suggests that partnered relationships remain a central aspect of Australian society and a key source of emotional and social support.

**Figure 1**  
**The relationships people chose as their three closest**  
 Top three relationships



## The benefits of coupling up

There is evidence that suggests those in partnered relationships receive greater emotional support, an increased sense of happiness, lower levels of stress, enhanced self-development and economic stability (Hughes & Waite 2009; Simon 2002; Williams 2003). While some research has suggested that the benefits of marriage are more often afforded to men, other research has found no gendered differences in happiness or wellbeing for married people (Williams 2003; Baxter 2011). Coupling up provides benefits of intimacy, companionship, shared responsibilities and decision-making, social and familial support systems and other benefits that do not solely, or always, arise from partnered relationships but are common and reinforced by societal structures that privilege partnered people. In many ways, our society is set up to favour people in partnered relationships. There are economic, social and cultural advantages and accommodations for couples – which are sometimes referred to as ‘couple privilege’.

Our [Full Report](#) found similar positive outcomes for people in partnered relationships. We found that those who could rely on one person for a variety of emotional, social and physical forms of support faced fewer relationship pressures, had better wellbeing, higher self-rated mental health and were less lonely. While a partner did not always fulfil this role, people who were most likely to say that they could rely on one person for all forms of support, chose their partner as their most important person. We also found that people who lived with their most important person were more likely to feel satisfied with this relationship than those who did not. Again, those most likely to live with their most important person were partnered. Finally, we found that people who identified their partner as their most important relationship were more satisfied with this relationship than those who identified a family member or friend as their most important.

While partnered relationships do not always make life easier, the cultural, health and wellbeing benefits afforded to couples is notable throughout the results of the survey. Despite this, research indicates that the negative aspects of a close relationship has a more powerful influence on an individual's overall wellbeing than the beneficial effects derived from positive close relationships (Rooks 2014). As such, while the benefits of being ‘coupled up’ are numerous, maintaining a relationship characterised by negativity is unlikely to afford these benefits.

## The impacts of relationship breakdown

Given the extensive benefits of coupling up, it is unsurprising that a breakdown of this important relationship is a significant life event. It can disrupt living arrangements, routines, future plans, financial security and other relationships. Relationship breakdowns can be emotionally, psychologically and sometimes financially challenging. There is also stigma associated with relationship breakdowns which can be more pronounced in certain cultures and communities. There is a significant body of research exploring these effects (for example, Rhoades et. al., 2011 and Luu 2023).

### Relationship breakdown effects mental health and can lead to suicidality

Previous research into relationship breakdown has demonstrated the negative effect relationship breakdown has on mental health. Relationship breakdown increases the risk of mental ill-health and illness, whether that be recent relationship breakdown or a family of origin experience (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 9-11). Divorce is associated with higher rates of major depression (Bruce & Kim 1992 in Sbarra et. el., 2018). Divorce and separation are also associated with increased anxiety (Richards & Wadsworth 1997). However, mental health and relationship breakdown have a complex connection. Those living with challenges to mental health often enact these in a relational context. For example, those who are depressed can experience low or absent sex drive or reclusive and self-destructive behaviours (Trudel, 1991). Mental ill-health has also been linked to marital breakdown in longitudinal data (Butterworth and Rodgers 2008).

Research also demonstrates that relationship challenges and breakdown contribute to suicidality. Divorced men are eight times more likely to die by suicide, and women are at an increased risk of suicidal behaviour (Kposowa, 2003). The risk of suicidality is highest immediately after and 2 years post-separation, and high in the 4 years before separation (Batterham et. al. 2014). In fact, the disruption of family by separation or divorce is understood as the second greatest psychosocial risk factor for suicide in Australia, affecting men more than women (AIHW 2022). Additionally, ‘problems in relationship with spouse or partner’ is considered the third most prevalent psychosocial risk factor.

### **Relationship breakdown increases addictive behaviours that negatively impact wellbeing**

Relationship breakdown is also associated with increased use of alcohol, regardless of other factors which are known to affect alcohol use, including educational attainment, history of parental divorce, adolescent aggression and neuroticism, and current risk of alcohol abuse and financial hardship (Richards et. al. 1997). Relationship breakdown is also associated with an increase in gambling (and vice versa), with divorce understood as a risk factor for future gambling harm (Syvertsen, 2023).

### **Relationship breakdown increases economic disadvantage for women**

A European study found that across every county analysed, women are economically disadvantaged following a divorce, with lone parents of either gender finding themselves at much higher risks of poverty (Mortelmans 2020). While men display diverse patterns of gains and losses, women are mostly losing out financially (Andreß et. al. 2006). When unmarried co-habiting partners separate, the economic outcomes are less gendered and less extraordinary, partly because having dependent children is detrimental for income trajectories after a break-up, and unmarried couples are less likely to have children (Mortelmans 2020). Additionally, women who have more children are less able to find employment, further attributing to their economic disadvantage (Van Winkle and Leopold 2021).

### **Relationship breakdown has long-lasting effects on wellbeing, especially on older women and those who do not re-partner**

Divorce has a long-lasting, negative impact on wellbeing that persists into later life for both men and women (Gray et. al., 2011). Notably, the negative effects of divorce on wellbeing are largely confined to those who do not re-partner. For women who are divorced and remain single, the negative effects of divorce affect general health, vitality and mental health, while for men the ongoing effects seem to be smaller and less likely to affect their physical or mental health, but rather perceived social support.

### **Social supports are interrupted by relationship breakdown, but are key to recovery**

Relationship breakdown often involves loss of the family in-law network and friends who have closer ties to the spouse (Ward & Leigh, 1993). However, social support is understood as one of the key resources that mediates the effect of relationship breakdown on wellbeing (Kołodziej-Zaleska, et. al., 2016).

### **Relationship breakdown challenges most, benefits some and can have lifelong effects**

Relationship breakdown is a major life event with far-reaching impacts on mental health, finances, and social ties. It increases risks of depression, anxiety, suicidality (especially for men), alcohol use, gambling, and economic disadvantage (particularly for women). The negative effects can persist long-term if individuals don't re-partner, rebuild social support, and regain overall wellbeing. However, while challenging for most, relationship dissolution can benefit some people. Maintaining social connections is key for recovery and resilience after this pivotal life transition.

*“Divorce benefits some individuals, leads others to experience temporary decrements in well-being that improve over time, and forces others on a downward cycle from which they might never fully recover.” (Amato, 2000).*

This special report investigates the effects partnered relationship breakdown has on connection, wellbeing, and future outlooks. This report also explores how these breakdowns have spurred self-growth and brought about other benefits. It is important we understand how different people cope with this common but disruptive life event, gaining better insight into what helps people and what inhibits them from seeking support.

This report is part of the larger Relationship Indicators project which seeks to shed light on the state of relationships in Australia, and demonstrate the integral role relationships play on our health, wellbeing and happiness. It highlights the need for supports which help all Australians nurture their relationships, to provide everyone with the opportunity to create respectful, enduring and fulfilling connections throughout the lifetime.

# Key Findings

1.

Just under 1 in 3 Australians have experienced a relationship breakdown that still affects them today.

2.

Women, people with a long-term mental or physical health conditions, people with disability and LGBTQIA+ people were more likely to report ongoing impacts from a partnered relationship breakdown.

3.

People who reported lasting impacts had reduced wellbeing, were 1.5 times lonelier and experienced more pressures in their future relationships than those who didn't have these experiences. It is difficult to understand from our results if these impacts can be attributed to the relationship breakdown or if more complex interplays are occurring, where these, and other social determinants, both precipitate the relationship breakdown and impede one's recovery from it.

4.

People were most likely to say that their relationship breakdown led to emotional or mental health issues, practical and financial struggles or interpersonal challenges.

5.

1 in 5 said they had trust issues following the relationship breakdown, including emotional and mental health concerns, practical challenges with parenting arrangements and lingering impacts on their children affecting behaviour and future relationships.

6.

Children were a key concern for 1 in 3 people when discussing the ongoing impacts of their relationship breakdown.

7.

Men were more likely to face difficulty in the beginning of the relationship breakdown and then rely on their relationships for support, while women were more likely to seek professional support or focus on more introspective reflection and self-growth.

8.

The unwillingness of people to seek professional support during the relationship breakdown is concerning. A partner relationship breakdown leads to a fragmentation of support systems and has a significant impact on wellbeing.

9.

Intimate partner violence is a common thread throughout. The prevalence of violence, abuse and toxicity throughout the responses suggests that relationship breakdown brings greater risk of abusive and violent behaviours, which must be managed closely.

10.

Relationship breakdown is more likely to lead to personal development than external improvements, however this is somewhat gendered. Women were more likely to place a stronger emphasis on personal growth, confidence, self-discovery, improved mental health, and getting away from abusive or toxic situations, while men had more responses related to finding a better partner, avoiding a toxic or an incompatible relationship and finding freedom.

11.

Age had an effect on perceptions of positive outcomes. The younger age groups emphasised personal growth, leaving unhealthy relationships, and finding new partners. The middle age groups frequently cited escaping abuse and gaining independence. While the older groups tended to highlight freedom, peace of mind and positive self-discovery after ending unhappy marriages/relationships.

# About the survey questions

This analysis focuses on three short-answer survey questions we asked in the Relationship Indicators Survey. They include:

1. Have you experienced a break-up, separation, divorce or bereavement in a partnered relationship which has had a lasting impact that still affects you today?
  - a. Yes, a break-up
  - b. Yes, a separation
  - c. Yes, a divorce
2. What, if any, ongoing effects or challenges have you experienced as a result of the break-up, separation, or divorce?

3. What, if anything, have you done to manage the impact/s of the break-up, separation, or divorce?
4. Did anything good come from the break-up, separation, or divorce?

The open-ended questions were analysed in-house by Relationships Australia's research team. Questions were analysed using qualitative coding software, using an independent validation approach.

For a full breakdown of the survey methodology, you can access the [Technical Report](#).

## Demographics

Among the Australian population, 31% have experienced a break-up, separation or divorce that still affects them today. From this:

**20%**

experienced a break-up.

**11%**

experienced a divorce.

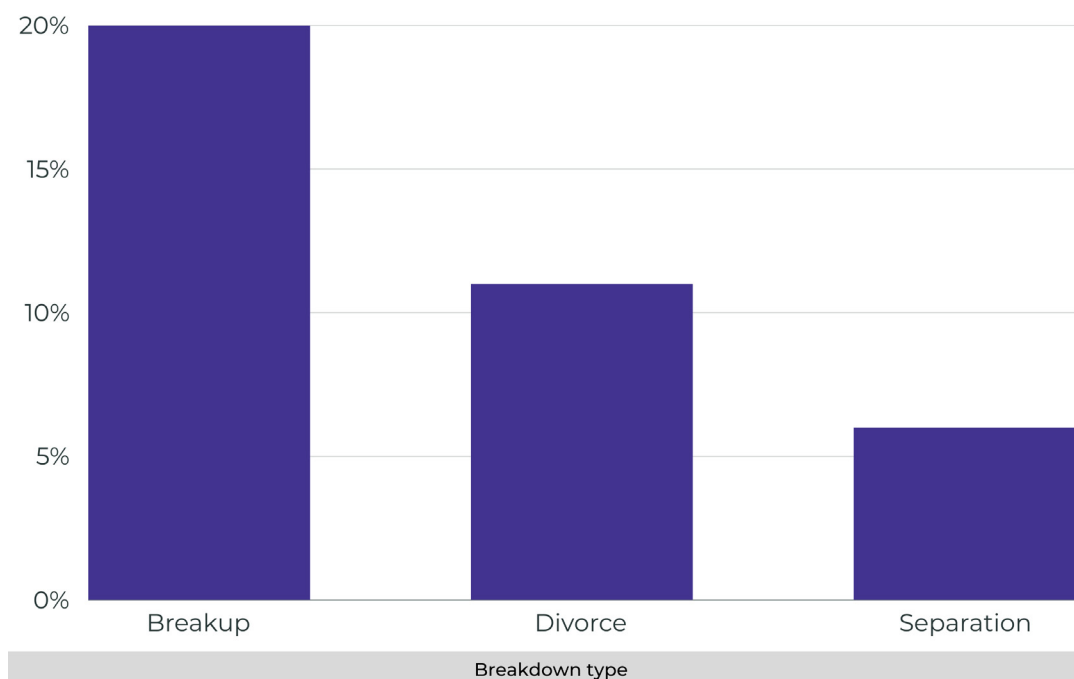
**6%**

experienced a separation.

**Figure 2**

### Experiences with relationship breakdown with a lasting impact

Percentage of Australians who have ongoing impacts, sorted by experience

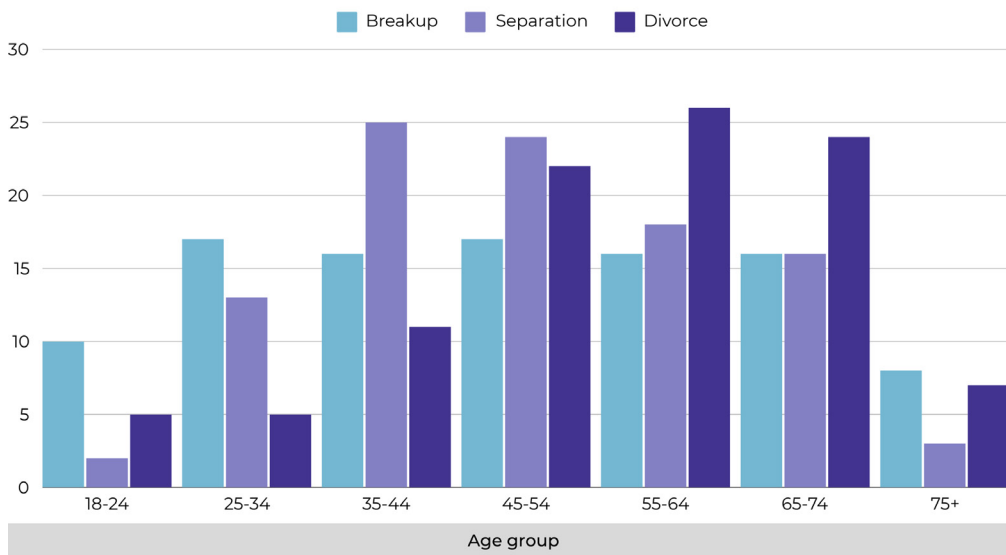




Just under one in three Australians are still managing the effects of a partnered relationship breakdown. While we acknowledge that relationship breakdown is a common experience, such breakdowns also present a variety of risk factors for mental ill-health, violence, and suicidality (Mental Health Australia, 2023).

According to the data, divorce was more common among older age groups (55+), while separation is more prevalent among middle-aged individuals between the ages of 35 and 54. Break-ups with a lasting impact are most likely to occur in younger adults, those between 18 and 34 years old.

**Figure 3**  
**Experiences with relationship breakdown with a lasting impact**  
 Sorted by age group and relationship breakdown

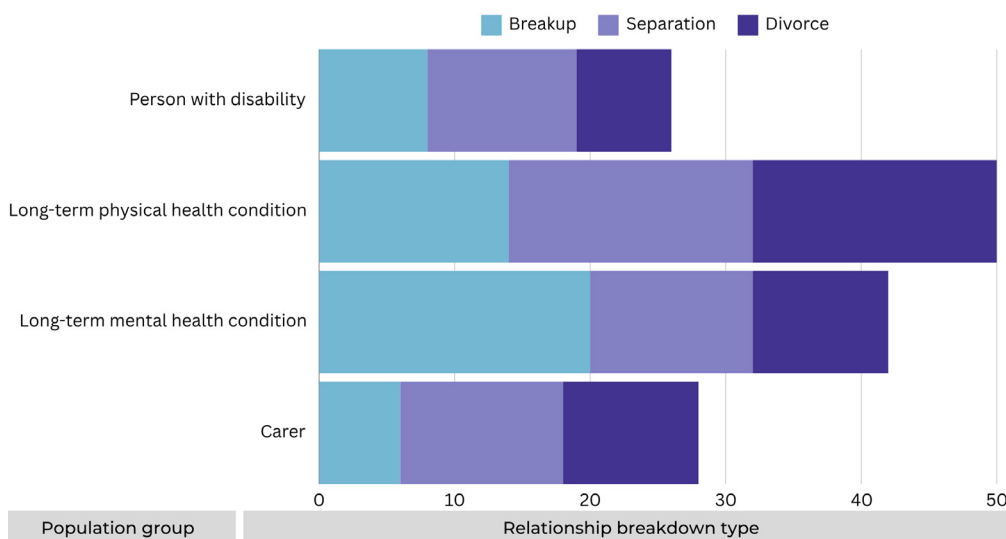


Women were more likely to report a relationship breakdown with a lasting impact, with 58% of respondents identifying as women, 48% as men and 2% as non-binary or other genders.

The data also showed that some sub-populations were more likely than the general population to have experienced relationship breakdown that still affected them today. This included 49% with

a long-term mental health condition, 46% of people with disability, 41% with a long-term physical health condition and 38% of LGBTQIA+ people, compared with 31% of the general population. It should be noted that this does not necessarily mean these groups experience more relationship breakdown, but rather that the impacts of these breakdowns have lasting effects.

**Figure 4**  
**Experiences with relationship breakdown with a lasting impact**  
 Sorted by population group



# Results

## Ongoing effects associated with the relationship breakdown

The first question asked respondents to describe the ongoing effects or challenges associated with their relationship breakdown. Based on the qualitative responses, the key themes included:

### Emotional/Mental Health Issues (44%):

- Such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, trust issues, trauma, PTSD, abandonment, grief, loneliness. This included emotional/mental health challenges in children.

### Practical/Financial Challenges (26%):

- Financial difficulties, housing/accommodation challenges, legal issues, co-parenting challenges, practical impacts on children.

### Interpersonal Challenges (18%):

- Difficulty trusting others, fear of new relationships, social isolation, intimacy issues, strained relationships with ex-partner and/or their family. We differentiated this from emotional/mental health issues if they specifically cited an impact on others.

### Lingering Effects (13%):

- Lasting impact on mental health, difficulty moving on, occasional memories/thoughts about the ex-partner, wariness of future relationships. We differentiated this from emotional/mental health issues if they focused on the ongoing impact it was having, rather than just the impact at the time.

### Sense of Self and Identity (13%):

- Loss of confidence, questioning self-worth, difficulty finding oneself again, regret over past decisions.

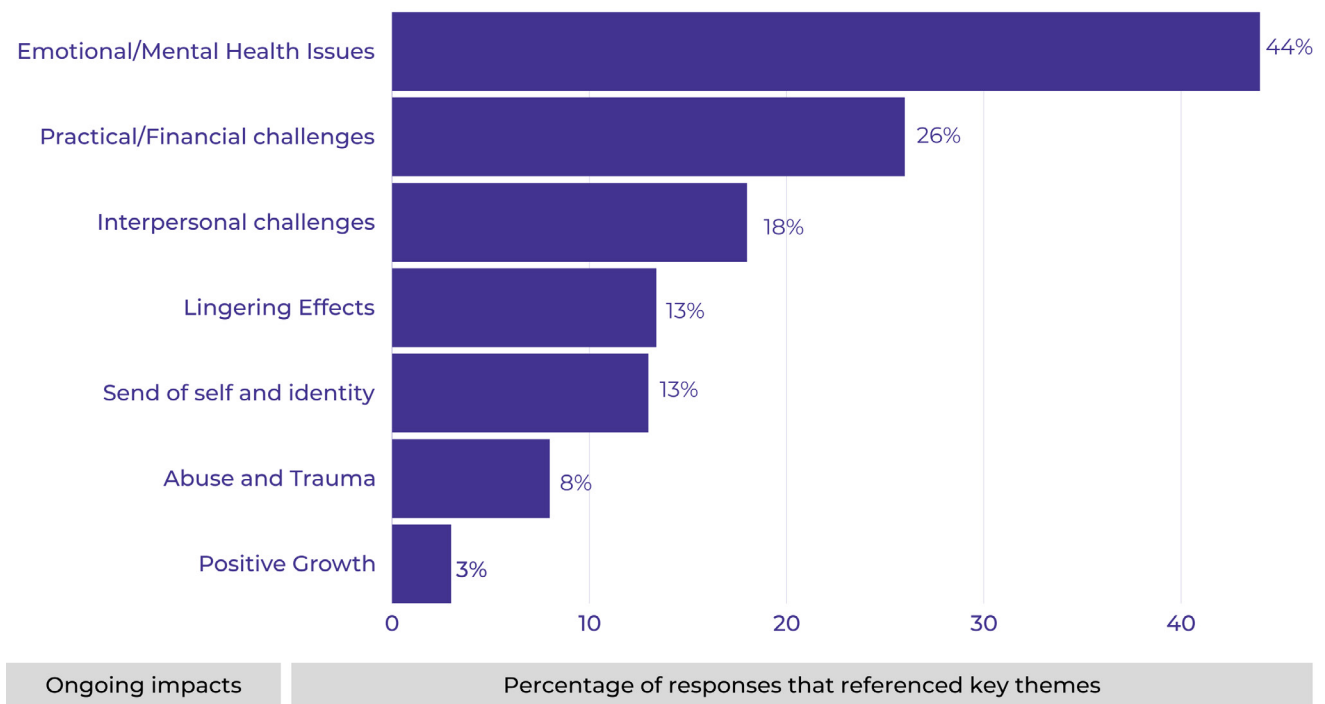
### Abuse and Trauma (8%):

- Experiences of domestic violence, emotional abuse and controlling behaviour.

### Positive Growth (3%):

- In some cases, people only mentioned that the breakup led to personal growth, independence, and a better understanding of oneself and relationships. This was further explored in the next qualitative question.

**Figure 5**  
**Ongoing effects associated with the relationship breakdown**  
Sorted by ongoing impacts



### **1 in 5 said they had trust issues following the relationship breakdown**

A loss of trust was a major concern for many respondents (20%). They expressed a general difficulty trusting others, often stemming from experiences of betrayal, infidelity, or emotional/psychological abuse in their previous relationship. This lack of trust appeared to be a self-protective mechanism, as respondents described deliberately shielding themselves from getting hurt again. The trust problems also negatively impacted their ability to be vulnerable and fully commit in new relationships. For some, they linked their trust issues directly to trauma or PTSD resulting from their past relationship breakdown.

### **1 in 3 said that their children were their key concern when discussing the ongoing impacts of their relationship breakdown**

Around 1 in 2, or 48% of divorces in Australia involve children under the age of 18 (AIFS 2023). Many felt the impact of being a parent during their relationship breakdown. In particular, 18% of the responses discussed challenges around co-parenting, visitation, estrangement from children, and the impact on the children as a result of the separation. Others mentioned that their children helped give them a focus while experiencing other challenges.

*“Having had children together means that the person remains part of your life even when you wouldn’t want them to. This places pressures on later relationships, even when children grow up”*

### **Loss of love was not a key concern for most**

Despite the fact that relationship breakdown is characterised by an erosion of a relationship distinguished by love and good will for one another, very few mentioned the loss of love as an ongoing concern. Here are some quotes from those who did:

*“A longing for the love that might have been. (Totally unrealistic and coloured through the eyes of time. Realistically I know the fantasy is not what today’s reality would be)”*

*“I still love him desperately but can’t live with him because of the damage alcohol has done to his brain and personality”*

*“Missing them. Wondering how it would have been”*

Only 4% of respondents specifically included loss of love in their response. This may be because there was no time limitation on when the breakdown occurred, so around 45% of respondents had entered a new partnered relationship at the time of the survey, thus the loss of love may be less memorable or no longer impacting them. However,

it is notable that these respondents still reported that the relationship breakdown was still having a major impact. This suggests that it is the other emotional, practical and relational impacts that cause lasting damage, as opposed to the loss of love itself.

### **Quantifiable differences in the health and wellbeing of respondents**

These short-answer responses paint a compelling picture of the heartbreak and challenge people experience following a relationship breakdown. We also found quantifiable differences in the health and wellbeing of respondents who reported a relationship breakdown that was still impacting them.

**People who reported lasting impacts from a relationship breakdown were 1.5 times lonelier than those who didn’t have these experiences.**

Our analysis did not find that relationship breakdown consistently led people to rate their mental health as poorer. This could be because many people experienced the mental health impacts in the immediate aftermath of the relationship breakdown, while the question addressing mental health only asked people to rate their mental health over the six months predating the survey. However, qualitative responses demonstrated that people’s mental health suffered significantly following these experiences, with 1 in 3 citing it as an ongoing impact. Additionally, modelling analysis showed that self-rated mental health would improve without these experiences. This suggests that better support during and following these experiences could prevent mental ill-health because of relationship breakdown.

Those who had experienced a relationship breakdown that was still impacting them reported more relationship pressures in their relationships with friends, families and new partners. Relationship pressures can be internal or external factors which can challenge the relationship and often require strategies to manage their effects. Respondents were asked to identify which pressures their important relationship had experienced in the last six months. The most common pressures facing Australian relationships were study or work commitments (26%), mental health (22%) and money problems (20%). One in five (20%) said that study or work commitments were the biggest pressure on their most important relationship.

While all relationships face pressures from time to time, the increase in relationship pressures for those experiencing ongoing impacts from a relationship breakdown has a tangible impact on the health and happiness of future relationships.

For example, the Relationship Indicators [Full Report](#) found that experiencing relationship pressures had significantly reduced people's wellbeing. Additionally, people who experienced more pressures in their important relationship had lower relationship satisfaction.

The complexity of these findings is difficult to disentangle. Some groups were disproportionately affected by relationship pressures, relationship breakdown, reduced wellbeing, loneliness and mental ill-health, something which was further impacted by socio-economic status, sexuality, gender identity and other social determinants. More analysis is required to understand if relationship breakdown itself is problematic, or if the general conditions of people's lives, which place pressure on their relationships and lead to relationship breakdown, are leading to these results. Currently, our analysis has found an empirical association between these factors. This means there is an association between two variables, such as experiencing more relationship pressures and relationship breakdown, but we do not know the causal relationship, or 'what causes what' and in which direction. However, our practice knowledge tells us that with the increasing complexity of a client's stories, comes greater difficulty when navigating relationship breakdown.

The findings suggest that reducing ongoing impacts from relationship breakdown is important for wellbeing. We must continue to fund relationship services and other supports to enable people to navigate relationship challenges in productive, respectful and safe ways. Given that all relationships face challenges, people need support to navigate disagreements and relationship breakdown safely to ensure that the effects of this experience do not harm future relationships, or contribute to chronic loneliness or mental ill-health.

### Managing the impact of relationship breakdown

While relationship breakdown is a common occurrence, the coping strategies people employ to manage it can have an impact on their ability to manage the stressful experience. We asked respondents to describe how they managed these impacts following their breakup, separation or divorce. Based on the qualitative responses, the key themes included:

#### Relying on friends and family (35%)

- Many responses contained phrases like *"support from family and friends"*, *"talk to friends"*, *"relied on the company of friends"*, *"leaned on family"* etc.

#### Counselling and therapy (32%)

- Such as counselling, psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy. *"A break-up triggered a breakdown, for which I engaged in fairly extensive therapy."*

#### Self-care and personal growth (24%)

- self-care activities like exercise, hobbies, travel, reading self-help books, self-reflection, focusing on self-worth, personal development etc.

#### Moving on and starting anew (19%)

- expressed sentiments about moving forward, getting over the past, starting fresh, finding a new partner, remarrying.

#### Focusing on children (12%)

- For responses that mentioned children, common subthemes were communicating with the ex-partner about the children, trying to co-parent effectively, focusing on the children's well-being.

#### Harmful coping strategies (11%)

- Some responses reflected difficult emotional states and anger in phrases like *"Felt like crap. Continue to feel like crap. Drinking cos of it"*, *"masking extreme unhappiness"*, *"drinking heavily"*, *"gambled heaps"* etc.

#### Accepting reality and letting go (9%)

- Responses that expressed the need to accept the reality of the situation, let go of the past, and find peace with what happened. This was slightly different to moving on, as it hinged upon acceptance, sometimes despite very challenging circumstances persisting.

#### Avoidance and distancing (7%)

- Some responses described avoiding the ex-partner, cutting off contact, distancing themselves, avoiding new relationships as coping mechanisms.

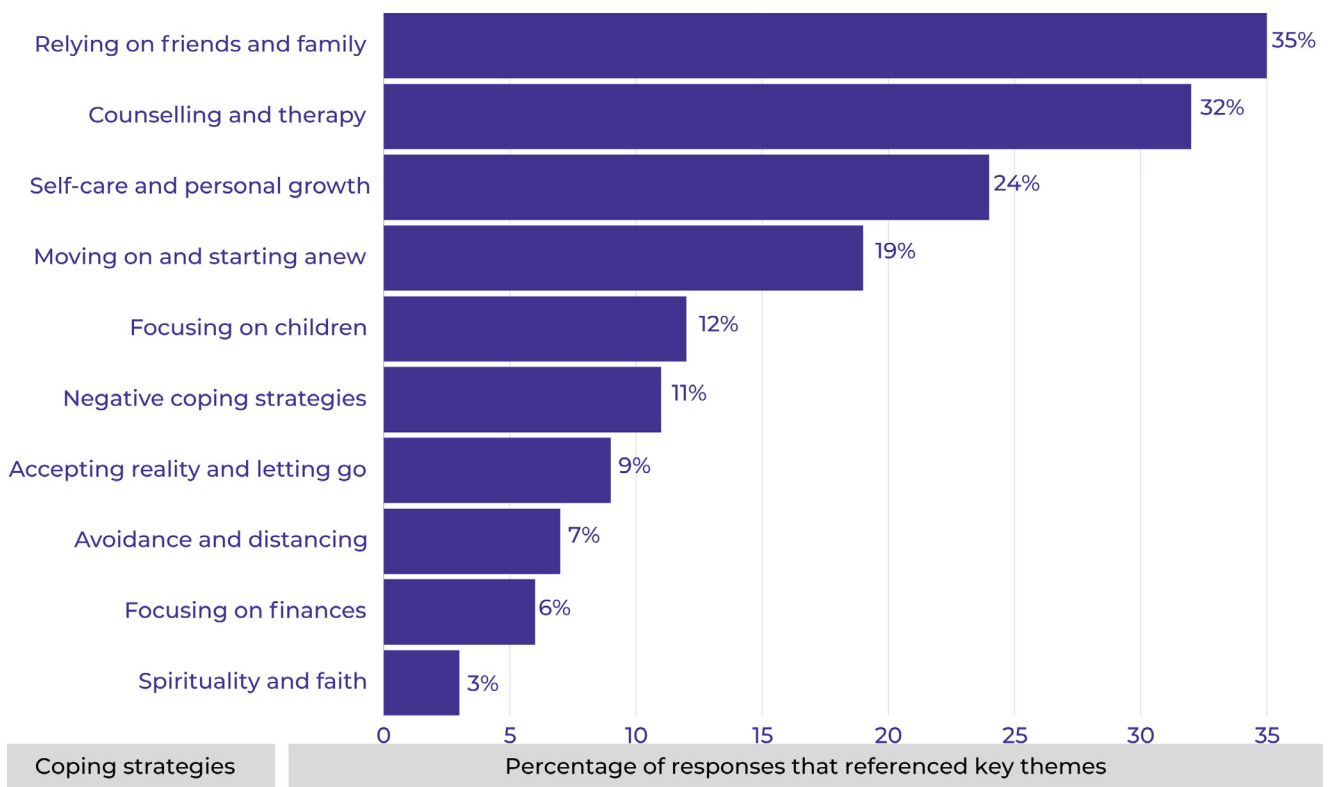
#### Focusing on finances (6%)

- While not as prevalent, some responses highlighted financial challenges like dealing with debt, needing to work more, becoming financially independent after the separation.

#### Spirituality and faith (3%)

- A small number of responses mentioned turning to spiritual beliefs. *"Pray. It's impossible to reduce the impact. It's an open wound that I need Gods love to help me live with."*

**Figure 6**  
**Ongoing effects associated with the relationship breakdown**  
 Sorted by coping strategy



**Men were more likely to face difficulty in the beginning and then rely on their relationships for support**

Responses from men highlight a range of approaches, from proactive coping mechanisms like seeking support and self-care to harmful ones like substance misuse and gambling (which some women also reported turning to). Many men emphasised the importance of maintaining relationships with children, accepting the situation, and moving forward, whether through new relationships or personal growth. Travel, hobbies, working and proactive legal or financial assistance were also common tactics employed to cope with the relationship breakdown. Given the complexity of a relationship breakdown, many mentioned that the earlier experiences were characterised by avoidance, denial and harmful coping strategies, that eventually gave way to more relationally focused tactics. Notably, men were more likely to rely on their children, family or even their ex-partner to manage the situation.

*“I was able to understand the effect that child sexual abuse has on a family. My former wife was abused as a child.”*

**Women were more likely to seek professional support**

Women appeared to have more proactive yet introspective approaches to managing the impacts of a relationship breakdown, with a greater focus on mental health support and personal development. The analysis revealed that women were more likely to seek professional support, with 74% of female respondents mentioning counselling, therapy, or consulting a psychologist or psychiatrist. This tendency to turn to professional mental health services was particularly pronounced among those aged 45-64, who emerged as the age group most inclined to seek such professional support. Notably, figure 3 illustrates that divorce with a lasting impact was more common for those aged 55-64 (26%), while separation with a lasting impact was more common among those aged 45-54 (24%), suggesting that it is life stage and gender, rather than relationship breakdown type, that influences the use of counselling as a coping strategy during this difficult life transition.

*“I learnt a lot about different types of people through my experience and I became a social worker. My experiences help me understand and relate to my clients better.”*

### People usually seek professional support once the relationship is over

This willingness to seek help is a notable departure from other findings throughout Relationship Indicators, which showed that generally, only 6% of Australians would seek professional support if they were having troubles with their most important relationship. Notably, 46% choose to manage their issues on their own without the help of anyone in their life. This suggests that people are much more likely to seek support after the relationship has finished.

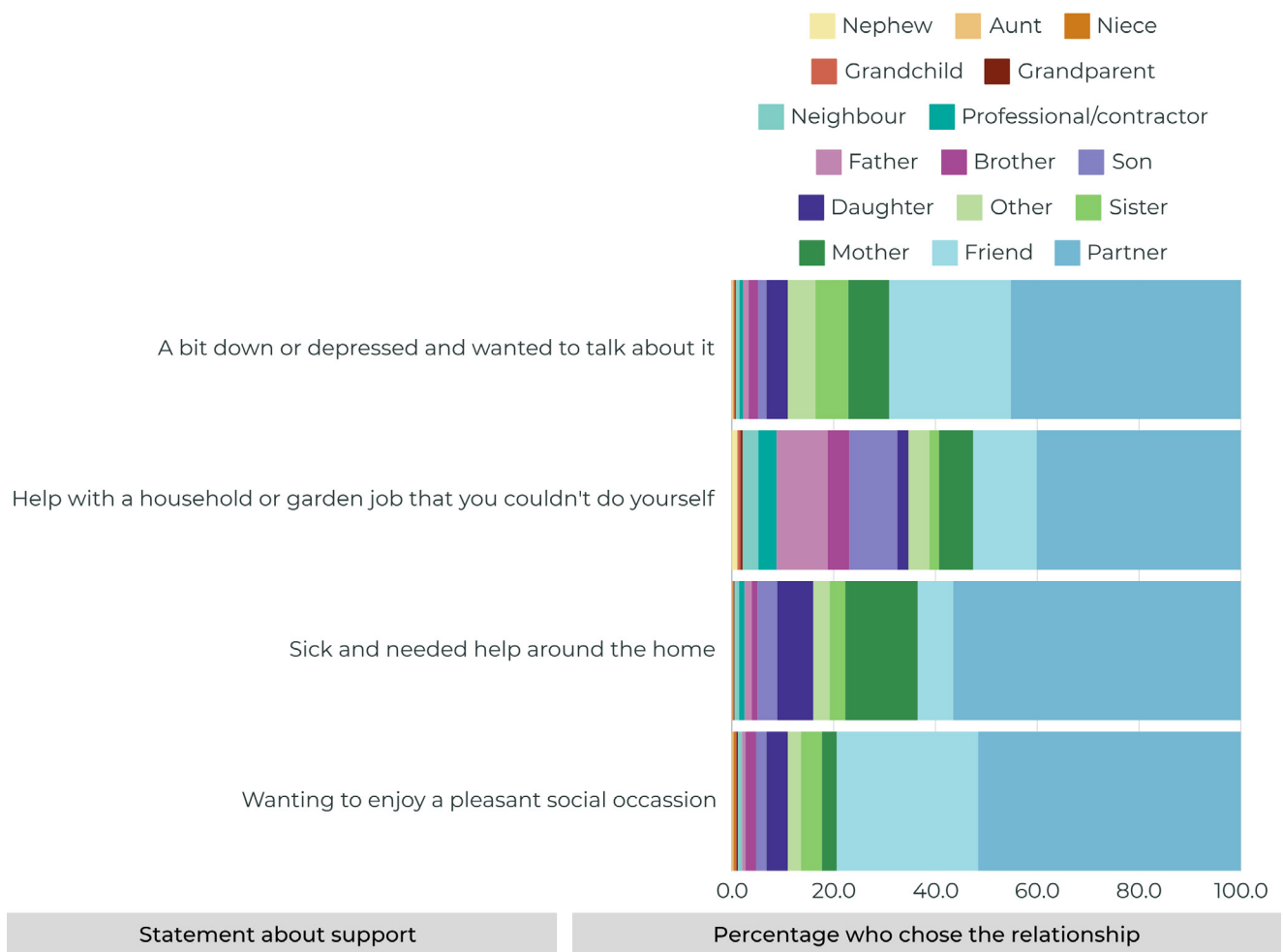
### Supportive partner relationships positively impact mental health and wellbeing

The impacts of reluctant help-seeking are made clear in the Relationship Indicators [Full Report](#). We found a strong correlation across a variety of variables that suggests the importance of having one, reliable relationship. People who selected more than one person across a variety of social and emotional support measures had a higher-than-average number of relationship pressures compared to those with one person who could provide different forms of support. Similarly, people who relied on multiple relationships illustrated lower subjective wellbeing, worse mental health over the past six months and were lonelier. The prevalence of this finding suggests that having a strong relationship which you can rely on for social, emotional, and physical support is extremely important.

**Figure 7**

### Location of social, physical and emotional support

Respondents could choose any relationship in their life, those who chose the same person for each question had better health and wellbeing outcomes



Most notably, those who were able to choose their 'most important person' scored better across these measures. This was more common in partnered relationships. Additionally, people most likely to report that they could seek emotional, social and physical support from one person, identified their partner as this source of support. People who chose their partner as their most important person also had greater relationship satisfaction and significantly lower levels of emotional loneliness than the general population. Partly, this may be due to the benefits of living with your most important person (which was common in partnered relationships), increasing ease of access to this support.

### **The fragmentation of support systems and its impact on wellbeing**

Australians' low-rate of help-seeking poses a risk to these partnered relationships. Compounding pressures in relationships can lead to distress and relationship break-down. The breakdown of this important relationship results in fragmentation of support systems, which is correlated with more relationship pressures in other important relationships, lower subjective wellbeing, worse mental health and loneliness. These findings highlight the importance of relationship services and other mechanisms which empower people to overcome challenges in their relationships. However, given the low rate of professional help-seeking prior to relationship breakdown, it is important we equip everyday people with the tools to manage relationship pressures and refer to professional support services when necessary.

Additionally, we must consider why people without supportive partner relationships are less likely to report that they have another reliable relationship. While we recognise that some partner relationships are unsafe or detrimental and should not be pursued or protected, the evidence shows that supportive, loving and respectful partner relationships can be extremely beneficial. More must be done to support people leaving partnered relationships, and those who do not want to be in a partnered relationship (7% of Australians), to establish supportive, reliable relationships with others. Australians who are not partnered need more support to ensure that their relationships are as fulfilling as those in partnered relationships.

*"After some years we are now good friends – I think of her as a member of my extended family, just not as my ex lover/spouse."*

### **A brighter future**

While the negative effects of relationship breakdown have been canvassed at length throughout the divorce and separation literature, there is less written on the positive impacts that can come from a relationship ending. The last question asked respondents to describe anything positive that may have come from the relationship breakdown. Based on the qualitative responses, the key themes included:

#### **Freedom/Independence (22%)**

- Newfound liberation and self-reliance e.g. *"I am no longer walking on eggshells"*  
*"My life was healthier and I've grown into a satisfying independence"*  
*"freedom to be who I am and not to be controlled and held back "*

#### **Found a new partner (19%)**

- Met a loving new spouse/partner *"Yes, I met my current wife and we have 2 beautiful children."*

#### **Personal growth/Self-discovery/Learning about oneself (15%)**

- Journey of self-discovery and emotional understanding *"Learning more about myself"*  
*"A deeper understanding of my own emotional needs."*

#### **Happiness/Peace/Relief (12%)**

- Achieving contentment and reduced stress *"Finding peace in my life as is"* *"I was relieved and gradually became less stressed and happier."*

#### **Escaping an abusive or unhealthy relationship (7%)**

- Escaping a toxic or violent situation *"Yes, freedom from domestic violence relationship"*  
*"Yes! I got out of a toxic relationship"*

#### **Improved relationships with children/family (6%)**

- Regaining closeness with children and other family members *"My children and I now live peacefully"* *"Closer to my 3 children"*

#### **Opportunity for a fresh start/New experiences (4%)**

- Embracing new beginnings and experiences *"Learning more about myself, including what I want and not want, and that open-mindedness and no prejudice towards others is a pre-requisite for the person that will be my next partner."*

#### **Financial stability (4%)**

- Gaining economic freedom and independence *"I have my financial freedom. I can do what I want, when I want and if I want."*

**Resilience/Strength (3%)**

- Developing inner fortitude and strength  
*“I am a stronger person who likes herself”*

**No longer having to deal with negative behaviours/traits of ex-partner (3%)**

- Leaving behind unhealthy dynamics/behaviours  
*“Not having to deal with lies, able to rebuild relationships with friends that they destroyed”*

**Learned about healthy relationships/red flags (2%)**

- Learning to recognise relationship red flags  
*“Ability to more easily recognise signs of relationship trouble” “Awareness of coercive control and manipulation, abuse and relationship red flags.”*

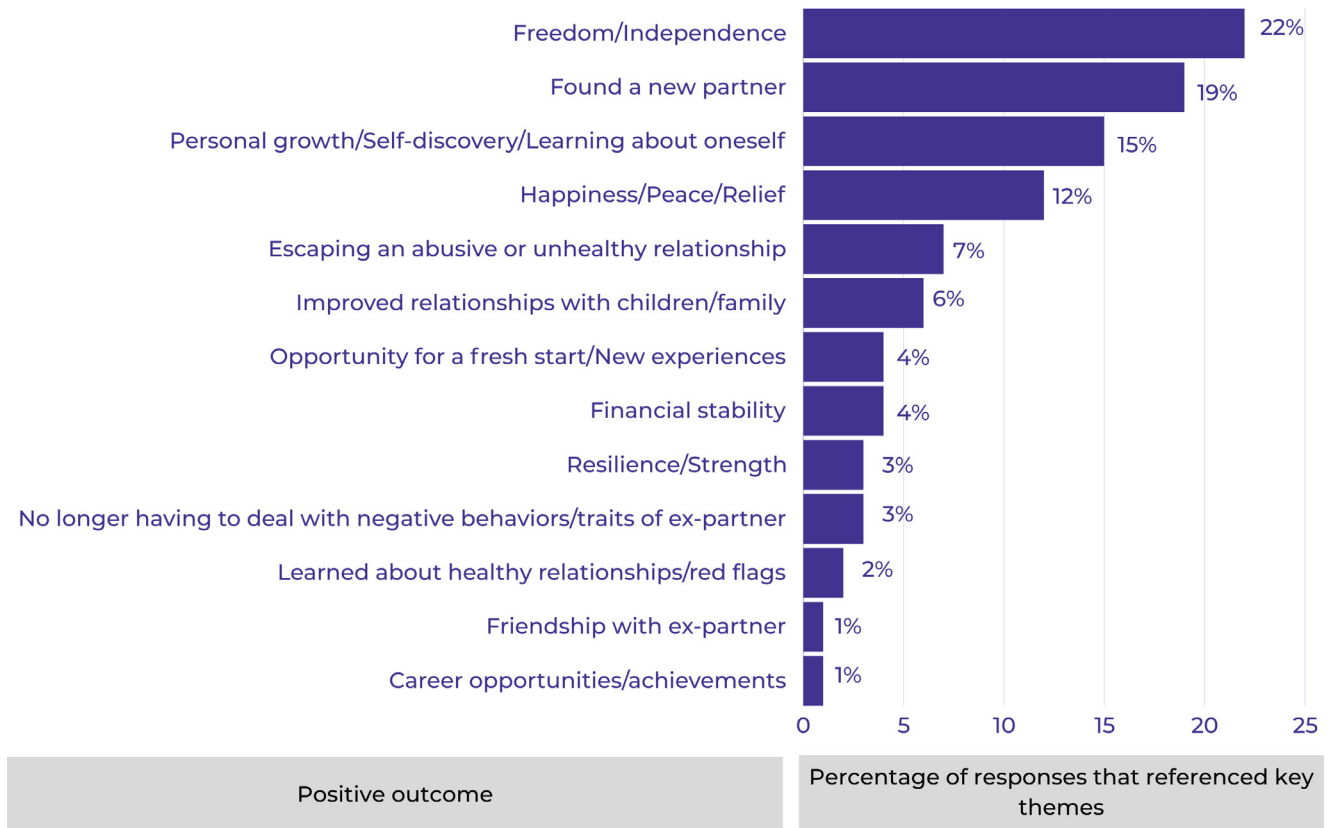
**Friendship with ex-partner (1%)**

- Maintaining an amicable post-separation friendship  
*“we’re better apart and still friends” “We still remained friends, I get so much support”*

**Career opportunities/achievements (1%)**

- Newfound professional growth and achievements  
*“Yes I had a successful career which would not have happened if I had not separated and divorced.” “Having lived in a regional area and now in the city the benefits of my greater career choices”*

**Figure 8**  
**Positive outcomes of the relationship breakdown**  
Sorted by positive outcome





### **Relationship breakdown is more likely to lead to personal development than external improvements**

People were more likely to cite self-improvements (92% of all responses) as a positive outcome from a relationship breakdown, as opposed to relational or external improvements (40% of all responses). For example, people cited personal growth and self-discovery, resilience and strength and better understanding of relationship dynamics. However, finding a new partner and improving family relationships were also frequently cited as major external positive outcomes.

### **Intimate partner violence is a common thread throughout the stories**

Seven percent mentioned that a key benefit was escaping a relationship that was characterised by intimate partner violence. It was prevalent across genders and age groups. Additionally, 1 in 8 mentioned violence, abuse or control in the other short-answer questions throughout this report. Given that this section of the survey only sought to capture relationship breakdowns that were still affecting people, the high prevalence is concerning. It suggests that IPV can have long-lasting effects and supports other research which shows that relationship breakdown brings greater risk of domestic and family violence, even if it was not present in the relationship beforehand.

*“The relationship was abusive, rather than the divorce affecting me, that fallout and self-esteem issue of the relationship can still affect me.”*

Relationship Indicators also found that 1.7 million Australians (or 8.8%) felt unsafe disagreeing with the current person they identified as the most

important person in their life. This included people who chose familial relationships (nephew, aunt, sister and mother) as well as people who chose their partner, suggesting people feel unsafe in a variety of relationships. While feeling ‘unsafe to disagree’ does not always equate to violence; it can be indicative of risk factors associated with family and domestic violence.<sup>1</sup> The findings across this survey suggest that violence pervades current and past relationships and is occurring across age groups, impacting people’s future relationships.

### **Perception of positive outcomes is skewed by age and gender**

The perception of positive outcomes were gender dependent. Women seemed to place a stronger emphasis on personal growth, self-discovery, improved mental health, confidence, self-esteem, and getting away from abusive situations, while men had more responses related to finding a new partner, avoiding a toxic or an incompatible relationship and finding freedom. Both men and women thought their relationships with children and family improved.

*“It prompted me to reorient myself and lead a healthier and happier life. Giving up drink, drugs, cigarettes, and exercising and meditating regularly. These things lead to further good, e.g. happier, calmer, more self-aware, more realistic”.*

Age also played a role in the types of benefits people were likely to mention. The younger age groups emphasised personal growth, leaving unhealthy relationships, and finding new partners. The middle age groups frequently mentioned escaping abuse and gaining independence. While the older groups tended to highlight freedom, peace of mind and positive self-discovery after ending relationships.

<sup>1</sup> The concept of ‘feeling unsafe to disagree’ as an indicator of family violence was developed through the DOORS screening tool by Dr Jennifer McIntosh.

**Table 1: Age-based responses to positive outcomes**

<b>18-24</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• More self-discovery, learning about self-worth</li><li>• Finding independence/freedom from unhealthy relationship dynamics like control</li><li>• Realising they don't have to stay in relationships that doesn't make them happy</li></ul>
<b>25-34</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Personal growth, becoming stronger/more resilient</li><li>• Getting out of abusive relationships</li><li>• Finding more compatible partners</li></ul>
<b>35-44</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Freedom from abuse, toxicity and control</li><li>• Self-discovery and understanding themselves better</li><li>• Focusing on children</li></ul>
<b>45-54</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Escaping abuse was commonly mentioned</li><li>• Finding more suitable partners</li><li>• Regaining independence, freedom and peace of mind</li></ul>
<b>55-64</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Freedom, independence from unhappiness/loneliness</li><li>• Personal growth, self-discovery</li><li>• Some cited positive impacts on children</li></ul>
<b>65-74</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gaining freedom</li><li>• Meeting new partners or friends</li><li>• Liberty from negative relationship dynamics</li><li>• Some mentioned positives like less stress</li></ul>
<b>75+</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gaining freedom and peace of mind</li><li>• A few noted becoming stronger and more independent</li><li>• References to impacts on children, years onwards</li></ul>

**An inability to report anything positive from the relationship breakdown**

Seven percent of respondents either did not provide a clear positive outcome from the relationship breakdown or explicitly stated that nothing good came out of it. There was no demographic pattern to these responses, suggesting that those who were unable to find positives faced unique circumstances, rather than positivity and recovery being limited

to certain populations of people. This highlights the need for comprehensive, holistic wrap-around supports to assist individuals navigating the challenges of relationship breakdowns, as every situation is unique and some may require more targeted interventions to facilitate healing and personal growth.

*“Not sure if anything good can come from these experiences”*

# Conclusion

This report provides an in-depth examination of the ongoing impacts of partnered relationship breakdown in Australia. The findings reveal that just under one in three Australians have experienced a relationship breakdown that still affects them today. The negative effects include emotional and mental health issues, practical and financial challenges, interpersonal difficulties, lingering trauma, loss of confidence, and in some cases, experiences of abuse and violence.

Women, people with disabilities or long-term health conditions, and LGBTQIA+ individuals were more likely to report lasting impacts. Those who experienced ongoing effects had reduced wellbeing, increased loneliness, and more pressures in future

relationships compared to others. Children were a key concern, with one in three citing co-parenting challenges or impacts on their kids.

While difficult for most, relationship dissolution also brought some positive outcomes including freedom, independence, personal growth, finding new partners, improved family relationships, and escaping unhealthy dynamics. However, the ability to recognise and enjoy these positive effects was shaped by gender and age.

The findings highlight the need for support services to help people nurture healthy relationships and cope with the profound disruptions caused by relationship breakdown across all life stages.

# Recommendations

## 1. Consider that breakups have a greater impact than we might think.

While separation and divorce hold more cultural weight and are more likely to be understood as a very stressful experience, many young people are reporting breakups characterised by abuse or with long lasting impacts on future relationships. To avoid the negative impacts associated with all kinds of partnered relationship breakdown, an education campaign should be developed to make people more aware of the need to care for themselves and seek support following a relationship breakdown of any kind.

## 2. Encourage help-seeking and equip people to support one another through their relationship struggles.

Australians are unlikely to seek professional support for relationship issues, yet relationship breakdown increases loneliness, reduces relationship satisfaction and leads to issues in other relationships. People need encouragement to access support earlier and more often. This requires more effort to upskill the community to respond to relationship issues with confidence, given friends and family are people's most common source of support. It may also include providing relationship education through other channels such as media, education and workplaces. Additionally, people must be taught how to refer to expert help when needed.

## 3. Increase access to relationship counselling and support services, especially for men.

The report highlights the importance of seeking professional help during and after relationship breakdowns but also recognises that men are less likely to access this formal support mechanism. Increasing the availability and accessibility of relationship counselling services through targeted outreach to men will help more people navigate these challenging transitions in a healthy manner.

## 4. Address the impacts on children, with a focus on safety and healthy development.

Children are significantly affected by their parents' relationship breakdowns. Services and targeted supports need to be well funded and accessible to children experiencing parental breakup, separation or divorce to mitigate the negative impacts on their well-being and future relationships. The Government should commission research about children's outcomes post-separation including safety of children and other family members, child and parent functioning, parentchild relationships, children's perception of parental conflict, and children's perception of parental availability and alliance. This would assist providers to understand which services are best meeting families' needs, and any services which may require modification.

## **5. Increase services ability to respond to intimate partner violence (IPV).**

The report reveals a concerning prevalence of IPV in the context of relationship breakdowns and many others were imbued with toxicity and a loss of a sense of safety. IPV is rarely present in isolation from other issues, such as misuse of alcohol and other drugs, harmful gambling, poor mental health, poverty and housing precarity. Ending violence against women and children within a generation demands a transformation and integration in how we deliver services across these sectors. Services responding to relationship breakdown must be resourced and well-equipped to identify and respond to domestic and family violence. Governments must ensure suitable perpetrator intervention programs are available nationally, to ensure services have effective interventions to refer to.

## **6. Tailored support for vulnerable groups.**

Certain groups, such as people with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ individuals, are more likely to experience lasting impacts from relationship breakdowns. Specialised support services tailored to the unique needs of these groups provide more effective assistance.

## **7. Encourage social connections and support networks.**

The report emphasises the importance of social support in coping with relationship breakdowns. Initiatives that promote community-building, social connections, and healthy support networks help mitigate the isolation and loneliness that often accompany these experiences. [Neighbours Every Day](#) is an example of a campaign that supports people to create and maintain connections with their broader community, which can support them in times of need.

## **8. Longitudinal research and data collection.**

The report highlights the need for further analysis to understand the complex interplay between relationship breakdowns, mental health, and other social determinants. Conducting longitudinal research and collecting comprehensive data could provide deeper insights and inform more effective interventions. Relationships Australia will be updating this data in 2024 with updated responses from the cohort who completed the survey in 2022, which will go some way towards helping us to understand how relationship breakdown long-term impact on people's wellbeing.

## **9. Empower Australians to create meaningful relationships outside of the partner dynamic.**

People who are not partnered need more support to ensure that their relationships are as fulfilling as those in partnered relationships.

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