

9 SOCIAL NETWORKS

The 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing asked about the frequency of contact with family and friends. Information was also obtained from those in contact with family and friends about the number of family members and friends that they felt they could rely on for help and the number they felt they could confide in if they had a serious problem.

9.1 Contact and closeness with family members

Almost two thirds of Australians aged 16-85 years (64.4%) were in contact with family members nearly every day in the 12 months prior to interview. One quarter (26.2%) were in contact at least once a week, with the remaining 9.4% of people in contact with family less than once a week.

The prevalence of mental disorders in people with different levels of contact with family members is shown in Table 9-1. One quarter (25.2%) of people who were in contact with family less than once a week had a mental disorder. The prevalence of mental disorders in females who were in less than weekly contact with their family was significantly higher than the prevalence in the general population (33.9% compared to 22.3%).

Table 9-1: Prevalence of 12-month mental disorders in people with different amounts of contact with family members

	Males (%)	Females (%)	Total sample (%)
Regularity of contact with family			
Nearly every day	16.5	21.7	19.2
At least once a week	19.2	20.8	20.0
Less than once a week ^a	20.0	33.9	25.2

^a Includes no family and no contact with family.

About one in twenty (5.3%) people reported having no family members on whom they felt they could rely if they had a serious problem. However, the majority of the population (62.1%) had between one and four family members on whom they could rely and about one third (31.8%) had more than four family members on whom they could rely. A similar pattern was observed for the number of family members in whom people felt they could confide, with 7.0% having no family members, 73.1% having between one and four family members and 19.2% having more than four family members in whom they could confide.

In general, the extent of closeness to family members was associated with the prevalence of mental disorders, with a higher prevalence of mental disorders in people who had less family to whom they felt close (Table 9-2). There was little variation between males and females.

Table 9-2: Prevalence of 12-month mental disorders in people with different numbers of family members to whom they feel close

	Males (%)	Females (%)	Total sample (%)
Number of family members upon whom people could rely			
No family members	31.4	35.8	33.4
1-4 family members	18.1	23.9	21.0
More than 5 family members	14.1	17.1	15.6
Number of family members in whom people could confide			
No family members	32.1	34.5	33.2
1-4 family members	18.1	23.1	20.7
More than 5 family members	10.2	14.6	12.4

Note: Does not include those with no contact with family or no family (0.8% of total sample).

9.2 Contact and closeness with friends

Just over two-fifths of the total population (42.7%) were in contact with friends nearly every day. A further two-fifths (42.8%) were in contact at least once a week and the remaining 14.5% of people were in contact less than once a week.

The prevalence of mental disorders in people with different levels of contact with friends is shown in Table 9-3. The prevalence of mental disorders was 27.5% in people who were in contact with friends less than once a week, 17.3% in those with contact at least once a week and 20% in those with nearly daily contact. Females with less than weekly contact with friends had a higher prevalence of mental disorders than the general population (31.7% compared to 22.3%).

Table 9-3: Prevalence of 12-month mental disorders in people with different levels of contact with friends

	Males (%)	Females (%)	Total sample (%)
Regularity of contact with friends			
Nearly every day	17.5	22.6	20.0
At least once a week	15.3	19.2	17.3
Less than once a week ^a	23.9	31.7	27.5

^a Includes no friends and no contact with friends.

One in ten (10.0%) people reported having no friends on whom they could rely if they had a serious problem. The majority of people (65.5%) had between one and four friends on whom they could rely and 22.2% had more than four friends on whom they could rely. A similar breakdown was observed for friends in whom people felt they could confide (11.2% with no friends, 70.5% with between one and four friends and 16.1% with more than four friends).

The extent of closeness to friends was not significantly associated with the prevalence of mental disorders (Table 9-4).

Table 9-4: Prevalence of 12-month mental disorders in people with different numbers of friends to whom they feel close

	Males (%)	Females (%)	Total sample (%)
Number of friends on whom people could rely			
No friends	19.7	31.6	24.6
1 - 4 friends	16.3	21.4	19.0
More than 5 friends	17.8	19.9	18.8
Number of friends in whom people could confide			
No friends	18.1	28.6	22.2
1 - 4 friends	16.8	21.5	19.3
More than 5 friends	17.4	20.4	18.8

Note: Does not include those with no contact with friends or no friends (2.2% of total sample).

