

THE MEANING OF LIFE: PANDEMIC PUTS FAMILY AND WELLBEING BACK INTO FOCUS

New research reveals older Australians are re-prioritising what matters most in life when planning their retirement.

Sydney, May 2022 – Recent events have shifted older Australians’ outlook on life and their expectations for the future, with new research revealing that most are now prioritising their physical health, reconnecting with family, and keeping their independence through retirement.

According to new research by Australian Seniors, the pandemic has influenced more than 6 in 10 (64%) over 50s, encouraging them to take stock of what makes a meaningful and fulfilled quality life, and reflect on what this means for their future.

Commissioned by Australian Seniors in partnership with consumer research group CoreData, [The Quality of Life Report 2022](#) surveyed more than 5,000 Australians over 50 to explore what matters most to the seniors community, as well as their attitudes towards retirement and the future of care.

The findings suggest that overall, older Australians have developed a well-rounded definition of quality of life beyond the pandemic, citing good physical health (87%), being financially comfortable (85%), good mental health (82%), and living independently for as long as possible (79%) as key components.

Deputy Director of the Centre for Ageing, Cognition and Wellbeing at Macquarie University, Dr. Carly Johnco, explains this priority reset, commenting; *“Older adults have been resilient in their emotional response to the pandemic often because they tend to prioritise close relationships, meaning and emotional contentment. The pandemic in many ways has forced everyone to become more aware of their mortality, with many people taking stock of their life circumstances and reprioritising the things that matter to them”.*

A reflection on what matters most in the present has also influenced expectations for the future, with as many as 1 in 3 (36%) retirees admitting that their priorities for a quality life in retirement had changed as a result of the pandemic, particularly regarding family and health.

While possible health care needs (65%) have always been somewhat of a staple priority for older Australians when determining retirement plans, it’s evident that recent events have made financial stability and mental wellbeing a focus, with costs (58%), maintaining a sense of purpose (43%), and finding meaningful ways to spend time (42%) becoming common considerations.

It’s also clear that recent events have highlighted the value of living independently for as long as possible for many older Australians, with this being ranked as the highest concern (61%) among over 50s when considering future living arrangements. Beyond this, other common anxieties towards retirement plans seem to ladder back to financial security, with general financial pressures (42%) and the affordability of retirement villages (36%) following as leading concerns.

Reconnecting with values of family, community, and living independently over the past few years has manifested in a strong preference for home care among the vast majority (82%) of older Australians, while the pandemic, conversely, has tainted perceptions of aged care facilities for nearly half (48%).

While the popularity of home care has risen steadily in recent years, the pandemic has brought to light some of its greatest advantages including living in a familiar location (78%), near family (51%), health care support (53%), or within an established community (46%). On the flip side, the popularity of home care also proves to be a deterrent for more than a third (34%) of senior Australians who are discouraged by dealing with long waiting lists. Other concerns around home care include finding a

suitable carer to trust (59%), being able to afford it (47%), and organising a suitable home care package (43%).

Deputy Director of the Centre for Ageing, Cognition and Wellbeing at Macquarie University, Dr. Carly Johnco, weighs in on the discussion. *“Older Australians have always shown a preference for staying in their home as they age, mainly due to having mixed feelings about receiving support and feeling more comfortable to receive this from people they know. The pandemic has highlighted some of the challenges associated with aged care facilities, such as reduced access to family members during end-of-life care and reinforcing people’s preferences to keep living independently at home where possible.”*

Regardless of their preferred living arrangement, it’s not uncommon for many older Australians to worry about how their future plans will impact their loved ones. In fact, as many as a quarter (25%) of older Australians admit they worry about burdening their children.

Although the majority (82%) agree that it’s important to have conversations around aged care needs with their family, nearly half (47%) of seniors who are yet to have this conversation anticipate it being difficult to talk about. For those who’ve already discussed the issue with their family, 2 in 5 (38%) agreed it was daunting, citing accepting the loss of an ability to live fully independently (69%) and the emotions of dealing with issues around diminishing health and longevity (65%) as the key reasons.

Deputy Director of the Centre for Ageing, Cognition and Wellbeing at Macquarie University, Dr. Carly Johnco, elaborates; *“Planning for retirement and old age can confront us with thoughts about a range of negative scenarios, including how we might need to change our lifestyle in the case of physical health problems, housing, finances and social relationships. It’s very normal to want to avoid situations or topics that make us feel anxious or uncomfortable, so it’s unsurprising that many Australians have delayed their retirement planning or have avoided having conversations about retirement planning with loved ones altogether. However, avoiding retirement planning doesn’t make it easier in the long run, and can result in poorer outcomes when the appropriate plans have not been put in place”.*

With as many as 2 in 5 (41%) older Australians reporting that their family has experienced some degree of anxiety or stress towards planning health and aged care needs for either themselves or a loved one, it’s not surprising that this is an uncomfortable conversation for many people. However, it’s important to recognise that older Australians require a robust support network to aid them through this life transition, with a third (35%) admitting they need more guidance organising their retirement chapter.

Deputy Director of the Centre for Ageing, Cognition and Wellbeing at Macquarie University, Dr. Carly Johnco, shares some sage advice for families looking to start the conversation. *“When tasks feel overwhelming, it’s often helpful to break them down into smaller steps. Breaking down the conversation around retirement planning into separate topics, whether it be financial, health, social or housing, can be easier than trying to tackle all the possible issues at once. Perhaps you could initially mention to a family member that you would like to set up a future time to discuss retirement and care plans or ask them to help you collect some information about one area of retirement planning to get them started. Having a close friend or family member support you as you consider the information can also help to keep the planning on track and avoid the urge to give up when it gets hard”.*

Further key findings from the research:

Outlook on life

- The events around COVID-19 and lockdowns have impacted over 2 in 5 (44%) seniors desire to live closer to family.
- When asked about their biggest concerns for the future, the most common responses among retirees were dealing with health issues (65%), where the world is going (49%), welfare and happiness of their family (42%), running out of money (32%), navigating the aged care system (31%), and losing control (29%).
- Seniors are more likely optimistic than pessimistic about the year ahead but, overall, most likely realistic. However, nearly 3 in 5 (58%) are minimally or not confident at all that life will largely return to 'normal' in 2022.

Outlook on retirement

- Retirees find more confidence through feeling valued (42%) and finding purpose (38%) even more so than typically common health and financial goals.
- Over 2 in 5 have changed their expectations of the quality of life they'll achieve/be able to maintain in retirement because of the COVID-19 pandemic (44%) – typically around travel, health risks, and financial security.
- Most (86%) older Australians suggest they would aim to remain in home care for as long as possible and a quarter (25%) are currently considering ways to extend their ability to remain in home care.

Financial concerns

- Many Australians agree that the COVID-19 pandemic shifted their expectations of life, with around 2 in 5 (41%) now accepting a future where they may have to make do with less money.
- Nearly 2 in 5 (38%) senior pre-retirees don't feel particularly prepared or feel prepared at all financially for their retirement.
- Despite the importance of money to support our retirement dreams, nearly 2 in 3 (63%) seniors don't have financial plans in place or only vague ones and only 1 in 7 (14%) have documented or professional plans.
- 3 in 10 (30%) expect to have (at best) an adequate or basic retirement living standard or are unsure, signalling they expect to have to make compromises to their quality of life.
- Over a third of pre-retirees (39%) agree they'd feel more confidence in their retirement if they knew how much money they can afford to spend now vs. how much to save or understood how they'll fund health and aged care costs (35%).
- 8 in 10 seniors find home care more appealing than living in a nursing home or aged care facility but being able to fund it is a top concern for almost half (47%). In fact, most senior Australians admit they have very little awareness about how home care packages work or how much they cost (74%) and feel they would need more support to organise home care for either themselves or a loved one (67%).
- More than half of retirees (54%) describe their current living arrangement as modest, adequate, or basic, suggesting they're already having to make compromises to their quality of life due to affordability.
- Around two thirds of retirees (65%) agree that one of the key pieces of advice they can share with younger Australians in hindsight is learning how to save and spend your money wisely (65%).

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About Australian Seniors

Australian Seniors launched in 1998 to meet the needs of the often ignored over 50s market. Since then, we've helped countless Australians protect the most important things in life – whether it's their family's future, valuable assets, or even their long-planned retirement.

We strive to be different through the diverse offering of our life, funeral, car, home & contents, landlords, pet, and travel insurance products by carefully selecting underwriters that share our vision of providing insurance that's simple, easy to understand, and cost-effective. That's why our policies have helped everyone from hard-working over 50s to self-funded retirees take control of the things that matter most.

About the Australian Seniors Research Series

The Quality of Life report forms part of the Australian Seniors Research Series. In its latest instalment, this study explores how Australia's over 50s are looking to tackle retirement living decisions and the motivations behind it. It also explores the impact that COVID-19 has had on the priorities of Australian seniors.

The report is compiled based on research commissioned by Australian Seniors and conducted by CoreData between 10 and 16 February 2022. The research was conducted via a quantitative online survey, gathering 5,002 responses from Australians aged 50 and above.

The sample is representative of the general senior population of Australians in terms of age, gender, wealth, and state/territory.