

## Transformation

# Wellness, part 2: Fostering social connection

03 June 2026

### Key takeaways

- Social connection plays a critical role in wellbeing, with social bonding activities releasing oxytocin, reducing stress and supporting cognitive health. While often viewed as individualistic, social connection is also shaped by broader infrastructure – such as community spaces, programs and local policies – with post-pandemic data pointing to rising demand for connection.
- Live events and pet ownership are key drivers of social connection, helping reduce loneliness while supporting economic activity. At the same time, rising remote work has contributed to workplace loneliness, which carries significant productivity costs - underscoring the importance of fostering connection both inside and outside the workplace.
- In the first installment of our series, we explored the wellness economy and its growth potential. Now, we turn to a key solution to tech-driven health challenges: fostering social connection.

### What’s the science behind social wellness?

Oxytocin is a neurotransmitter released in the brain during social bonding activities – such as hugging, laughing or engaging in meaningful conversation. Social support can reduce cortisol (the body’s stress hormone), which in turn lowers anxiety and supports immune function. And when social interaction occurs regularly, it also stimulates the brain, enhances memory and improves mental clarity.<sup>1</sup>

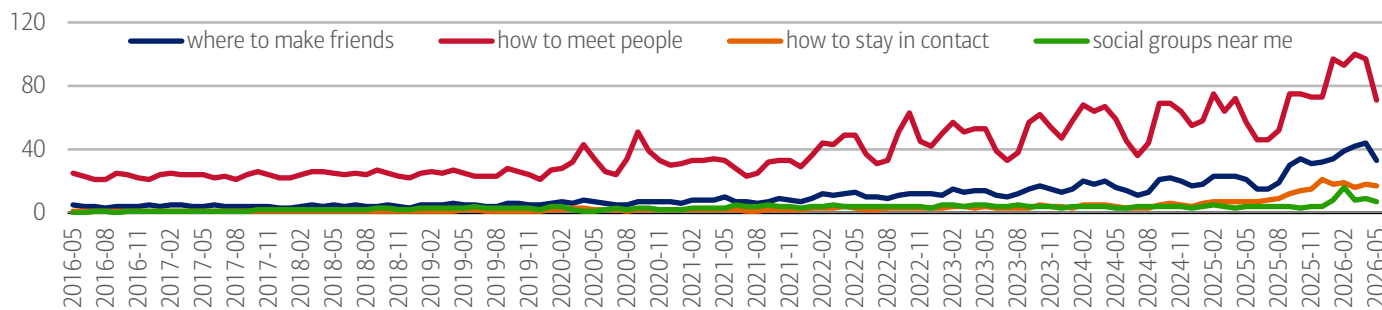
### Social connection is influenced by social infrastructure

Social connection is often thought to be mostly driven by the individual (e.g., someone’s personality) – but it’s also shaped by the broader social infrastructure of communities. This includes physical assets like libraries and green spaces, as well as community programs (including volunteer organizations or other membership-based groups) and local policies around transportation and housing.<sup>2</sup>

Exhibit 1 shows that individuals are increasingly seeking ways to meet people and maintain social connections. Historically, this was not a major search-driven concern, with relatively low activity in the late 2010s. However, in the post-pandemic period, interest has steadily ticked up, with searches for “how to meet people” reaching peak levels in 2026.

#### Exhibit 1: People are increasingly interested in how to meet people and how to keep up social connections

Worldwide Google searches for the following terms



Source: Google Trends

Note: Data as of May 26, 2026. Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart. 100 = peak popularity, 0 = not enough data.

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<sup>1</sup> Everyone Active.

<sup>2</sup> Office of the US Surgeon General. (2023). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The US Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.*

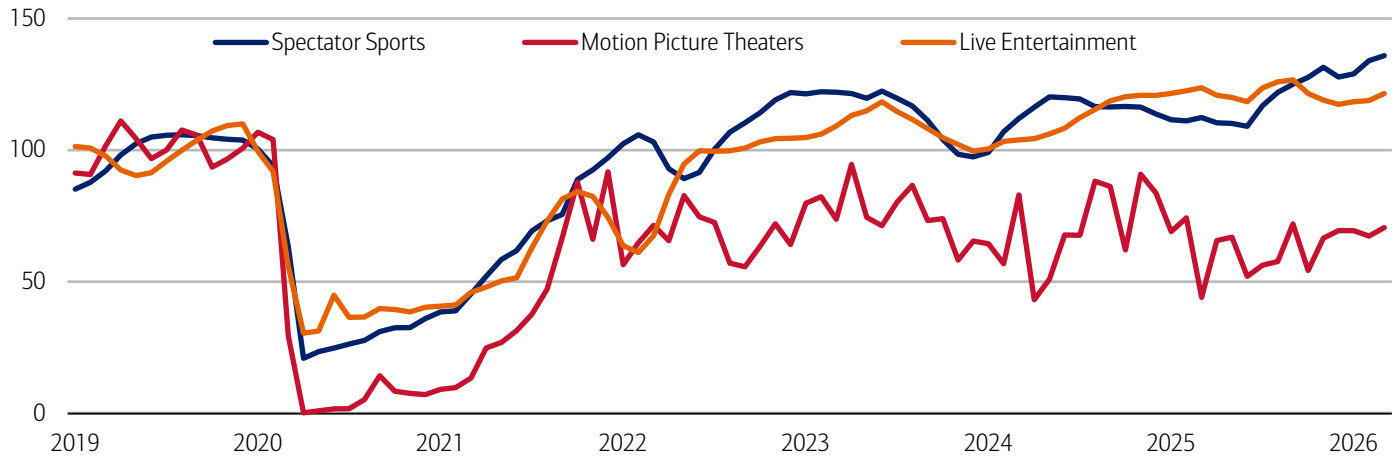
## Live events

In-person events that bring people together around shared experiences can play an important role in fostering social connection. Consumer demand for these experiences is evident in the data: the live entertainment market is projected to grow from \$202.9 billion in 2025 to \$270.3 billion by 2030 – a 5.9% compound annual growth rate (CAGR), according to Research and Markets.

Our own data has also highlighted the power of live entertainment – particularly sporting events – not only in bringing people together, but in supporting broader economic activity (read our publications: [On the ball: How football fuels local spending](#) and [On the ball: Local economies score when sports kick off](#)). Bureau of Economic Analysis data underscores this trend, showing strong engagement with event-related spending in recent years. As of March 2026, both spectator sports and live entertainment spending were above their 2019 averages, up roughly 36% and 21%, respectively (Exhibit 2).

### Exhibit 2: Spending on live events continues to strengthen post-pandemic, especially for spectator sports

Real personal consumption expenditure on spectator amusements by type (monthly, seasonally adjusted, index 2019 = 100)



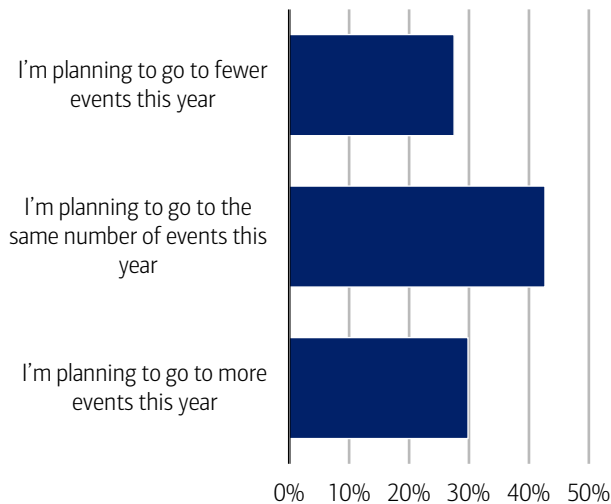
Source: Haver Analytics

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According to the [2026 Bank of America Summer Travel Outlook](#), nearly 30% of respondents plan to attend more live events this year compared to last, including concerts, sporting events and festivals (Exhibit 3). By generation, 91% of Gen Z plan to attend the same number of events or more – up from 85% in 2025 – while 80% of Millennials expect to maintain or increase attendance.

### Exhibit 3: Nearly 73% of respondents plan to attend the same number or more events in 2026 than in 2025

% responses to the question, “Compared to 2025, are you planning to attend more concerts/sporting events/festivals this year?”

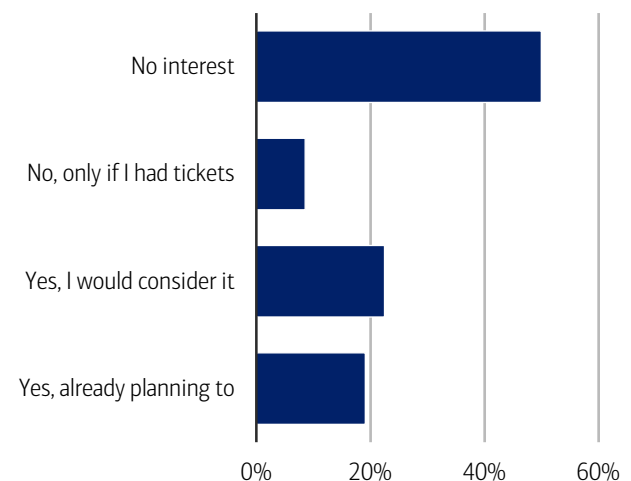


Source: 2026 Bank of America Summer Travel Outlook

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### Exhibit 4: Some respondents would travel to a host city for the atmosphere, even without a FIFA World Cup 2026™ match ticket

% responses to question, “Would you travel to a FIFA World Cup 2026™ host city to experience the atmosphere, even if you don't have tickets to attend a match?”



Source: 2026 Bank of America Summer Travel Outlook

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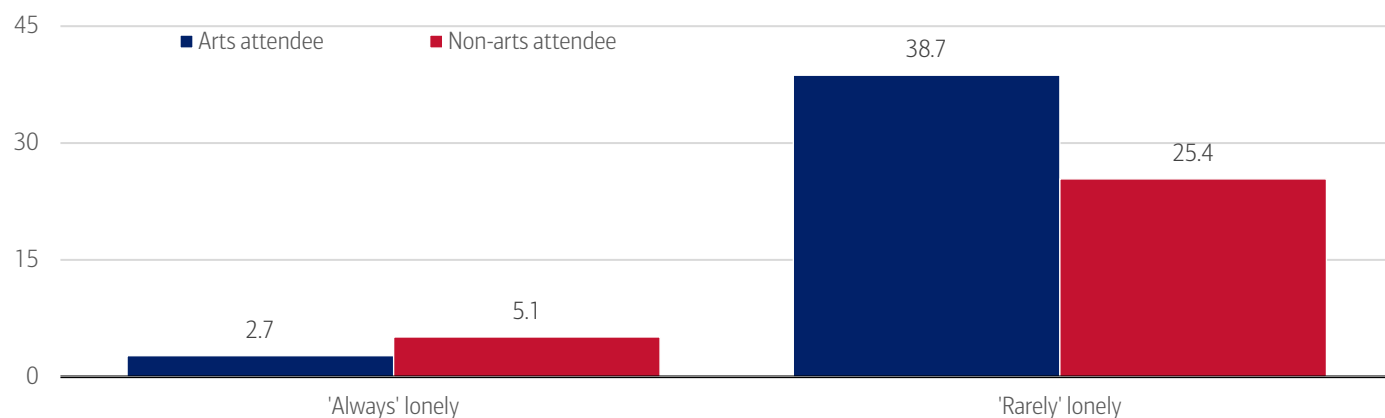
This sustained demand is reflected in consumers' willingness to make financial trade-offs to attend live events. Overall, 61% of Americans say they would adjust their spending to afford travel to a live entertainment event, rising to 88% among Gen Z. The most common trade-offs include cutting back on dining out, taking on extra work and using credit cards.

At a global level, this enthusiasm for live experiences is evident in large-scale events such as the FIFA World Cup 2026™, which is expected to draw nearly 6.5 million fans this summer – almost double the previous record. Historically, World Cup matches have attracted a cumulative 44 million spectators since 1930, underscoring the enduring appeal of live sports. Notably, around 40% of consumers say they would even travel to a host city this year without a match ticket, simply to experience the atmosphere (Exhibit 4). Check out our recent publication for more on this topic: [Summer Travel 2026: Resilient, but uneven](#).

While live events like concerts and sporting events create shared, high-energy moments of connection, arts-based experiences also play a role in fostering social connection. Between April and July 2024, roughly 25% of US adults attended at least one live, in-person performance and/or art exhibit in the previous month. And, according to the National Endowment for the Arts, US adults who attended live arts events were less likely than non-arts attendees to report feeling more acute levels of loneliness (Exhibit 5).

**Exhibit 5: US adults who attended live arts events were less likely than non-arts attendees to report feeling loneliness**

% of US adults who reported feeling lonely who attended or did not attend a live arts event



Source: National Endowment for the Arts, US Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey from April to July 2024, BofA Global Research

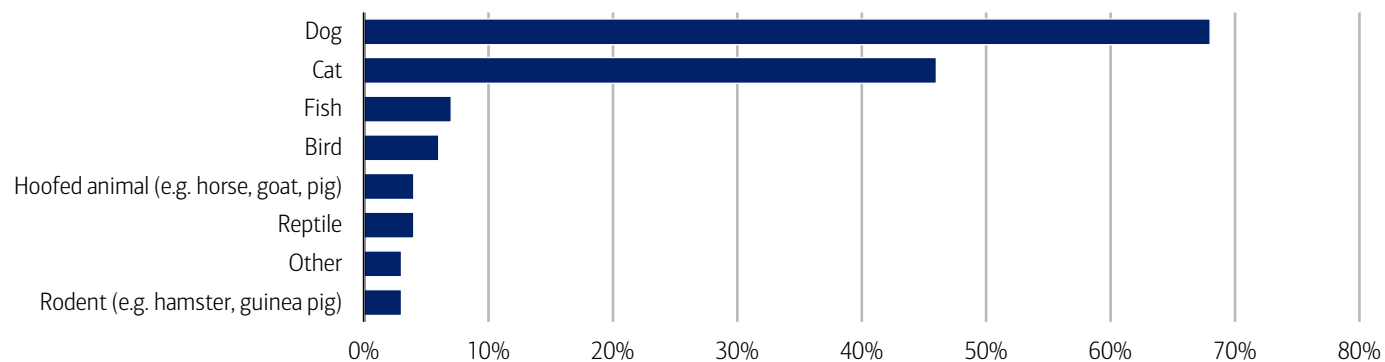
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**Pets**

Pet ownership has surged over the past three decades: as of 2025, 71% of US households (or 95 million homes) own a pet – up from 56% in 1988.<sup>3</sup> According to a CivicScience survey, dogs remain the most popular companion – with 68% of respondents owning one (Exhibit 6). Cats aren't far behind at 46%. For more, read our recent pet publication: [The price of pet parenting has gone off leash](#).

**Exhibit 6: Dogs and cats are the most popular pets in terms of ownership**

What type of pet(s) do you currently have? (% of respondents with pets)



Source: CivicScience

Note: 78,445 responses from June 1, 2023 to May 8, 2026. See methodology.

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<sup>3</sup> American Pet Products Association. (2026, March 26). *2025 US Pet Industry Hits \$158B, Set to Grow in 2026*.

This surge in ownership is also translating into significant spending. US pet expenditures reached \$158 billion in 2025, according to the American Pet Products Association.<sup>4</sup> Globally, the pet care market – encompassing pet food and pet products – could grow from \$207 billion in 2025 to \$271 billion by 2030, representing a 5.5% compound annual growth rate (CAGR).<sup>5</sup>

### Companionship pays (emotionally)

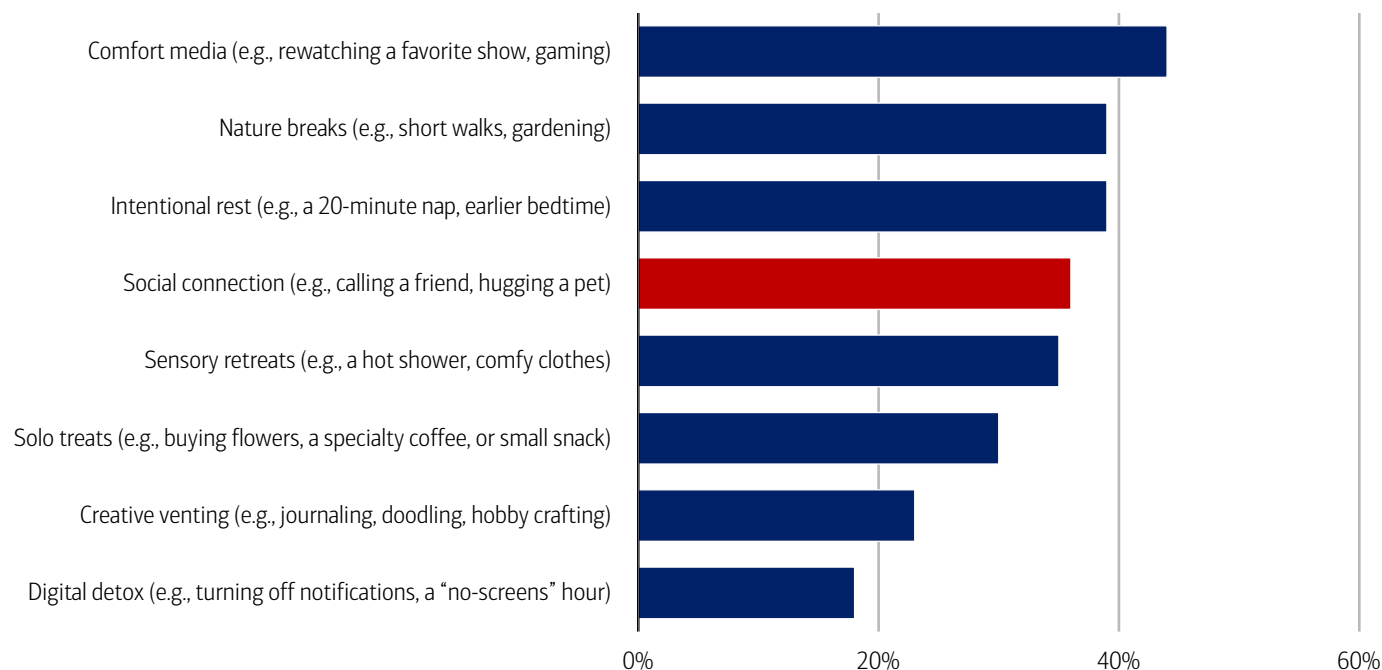
Studies have shown that spending time with pets can significantly increase oxytocin levels in humans and reduce cortisol.<sup>6</sup> Reflecting this, 97% of US pet owners consider their pets part of the family and 51% say their pets are as much a part of their family as human members, according to a Pew Research Center survey.<sup>7</sup>

For many, pets are also a primary source of stress relief. The American Heart Association finds that 95% of pet owners rely on their pet to manage stress.<sup>8</sup> The most popular ways pets help people are cuddling (68%), laughter (67%) or helping them feel less lonely (61%).<sup>9</sup>

Recent CivicScience survey data underscores pets’ role in everyday wellbeing (Exhibit 7). When asked how they reset after a bad day, 36% of respondents cited social connection – including hugging a pet. Interestingly, 18% reported engaging in a digital detox – turning off notifications and reducing screen time (a theme we explored [Wellness, part 1: The rise of the wellness economy](#)).

#### Exhibit 7: 36% of respondents seek out social connection – including hugging their pets – after a bad day

% response to the question “Which of these ‘small wins’ do you use to reset your mental health or treat yourself after a bad day (select all that apply)?”



Source: CivicScience

Note: 8,672 responses from January 20, 2026 to May 18, 2026. See methodology.

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### Teamwork and collaboration in the workplace

In 2024, a Gallup poll found that one in five employees worldwide feel lonely, rising to 27% among remote workers.<sup>10</sup> The share of employees working remotely (all or most of the time) increased from 20% in 2020 to 28% in 2023<sup>11</sup> and is set to grow

<sup>4</sup> American Pet Products Association. (2026, March 26). 2025 US Pet Industry Hits \$158B, Set to Grow in 2026.

<sup>5</sup> Puri, S. (2026, September 3). Pricing pressure, premiumization and pet health: Trends shaping global pet care in 2025. Euromonitor International.

<sup>6</sup> Beetz, A., Julius, H., Kotrschal, K., & Uvnas-Moberg, K. (2012, July 8). Psychosocial and Psychophysiological Effects of Human-Animal Interactions: The Possible Role of Oxytocin. *Frontiers in Psychology*.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, A. (2023, July 7). About half of US pet owners say their pets are as much a part of their family as a human member. Pew Research Center.

<sup>8</sup> American Heart Association. (2022, June 20). New survey: 95% of pet parents rely on their pet for stress relief.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Pendell, R. (2025, May 8). The Remote Work Paradox: Higher Engagement, Lower Wellbeing. Gallup.

<sup>11</sup> Slotta, D. (2025, December 17). Work from home: remote & hybrid work – Statistics & Facts. Statista.

further, with 73 million digital roles already able to be performed remotely worldwide – a figure that could reach 92 million by 2030.<sup>12</sup>

The implications are significant: employee disengagement costs the global economy roughly \$9.6 trillion in lost productivity each year, equivalent to about 9% of world GDP.<sup>13</sup>

That said, there are ways to address workplace loneliness. Employers can foster a more positive, inclusive culture, recognize employee contributions, and offer mental health and wellbeing resources (Exhibit 8).

**Exhibit 8: Solutions include a positive workplace culture, social interactions, flexible working and access to wellbeing resources**

Infographic illustrating ways to tackle loneliness at work



Source: People Insight, BofA Global Research

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<sup>12</sup> Masterson, V. (2024, January 9). *More and more jobs can be done from anywhere. What does that mean for workers?* World Economic Forum.

<sup>13</sup> Gallup. (2026). *State of the Global Workplace*.

## Methodology

Exhibit 6 is a CivicScience survey that includes 78,445 responses from June 1, 2023 to May 8, 2026. This is an ongoing survey.

Exhibit 7 is a CivicScience survey that includes 8,672 responses from January 20, 2026 to May 18, 2026. This is an ongoing survey.

The Bank of America 2026 Summer Travel Outlook survey was conducted online between March 26 and April 3. The survey consisted of 2,004 respondents throughout the U.S. Respondents in the study were age 18+ and were representative of the composition of the U.S. Census for age, gender, household income and Census region. Lower, middle and higher household income cuts in the survey were based on quantitative estimates of annual household income before taxes. They are defined as follows: lower-income households: \$0-\$66,000; middle-income households: \$66,001-\$130,000; higher-income households: >\$130,000.

### Contributors

#### **Lynelle Huskey**

Analyst, Bank of America Institute

#### **Vanessa Cook**

Content Strategist, Bank of America Institute

### Sources

#### **Lauren-Nicole Kung**

Equity Strategist, BofA Global Research

#### **Haim Israel**

Equity Strategist, BofA Global Research

#### **Felix Tran**

Equity Strategist, BofA Global Research

#### **Martyn Briggs**

Equity Strategist, BofA Global Research

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