



# Improving social cognitive skills to boost mental health and reduce dementia risk



## What is the focus of the research?

Conducting a world-first randomised control trial into the effectiveness of a tailored social cognitive skills intervention for older adults with cognitive concerns.



## Why is it important?

Older adults with cognitive concerns are at greater risk of loneliness, depression, and dementia. Social cognition refers to a person's ability to process and interpret social information. Older adults with cognitive concerns can find it difficult to read social cues, keep conversations going, and maintain relationships. Social cognitive impairments are consistently linked to poor mental health and reduced quality of life.

Unfortunately, there are no treatments that help people enhance or maintain social cognitive skills. Dr Samtani previously co-designed and piloted an online group program

for older adults with cognitive concerns, which showed promising improvements.

He will now conduct a randomised control trial to investigate whether the program helps people to stay socially connected, feel more confident in social situations, contribute to activities that are meaningful for them and improve their quality of life. The program covers verbal and non-verbal communication skills, managing sensory and cognitive challenges, assertive and respectful communication, maintaining good relationships, and goal setting. It will be delivered online so people in rural, regional and remote areas can take part.



**This program has the potential to help older adults with cognitive concerns live more connected, happier lives.** ”

– Dr Suraj Samtani

In another world-first, Dr Samtani will investigate whether social cognitive skills training improves the rate of cognitive decline. The program is conducted in partnership with Silverchain, one of Australia's largest aged-care providers. If successful, Silverchain will deliver the program to thousands of older Australians. The clinical resource will also be publicly available, along with webinars and workshops, for use by clinicians and allied health professionals.



## How will this happen?

**Stage 1:** recruit 150 participants aged 50 and over who have subjective cognitive decline, mild cognitive impairment, or dementia. A 'blind' assessor will assess participants' social cognitive skills, mental health, global cognition, and quality of life before the trial begins.

**Stage 2:** randomise participants into the intervention or an active control group. The intervention group will complete the 'maintaining social engagement' program: one online group session a week for five weeks. The active control group will play social games for five online group sessions.

**Stage 3:** the 'blind' assessor will re-assess participants immediately post-intervention and again six months later to determine any long-term outcomes.



## What is a randomised control trial?

Randomised control trials are considered the gold-standard in research that determines the effectiveness of an intervention or treatment. Specially selected participants are randomly placed into an intervention group (who receive the treatment/intervention being tested) or a control group (who receive another treatment). This allows researchers to determine any causal effect between the intervention and outcome. The researchers and participants are 'blind', which means no-one knows which treatment each participant is receiving. This rigorous method of testing removes the potential for bias, which is why it's considered the best method of experimental research.



## What will it mean for people with cognitive decline?

- An evidence-based program that improves social cognition.
- The ability to build and maintain interpersonal relationships.
- Improved mental health.
- Potential to reduce dementia risk and improve quality of life.



## Who's undertaking the research?

### Dr Suraj Samtani, University of New South Wales

Dr Samtani is a clinical psychologist and postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre for Healthy Brain Ageing. He has a PhD in Clinical Psychology and a Master of Psychology (Clinical) from the University of New South Wales. Dr Samtani has worked extensively in clinical practice, treating a wide range of conditions across the lifespan and brings expert knowledge of the social factors associated with dementia risk. He was previously awarded the Dementia Centre for Research Collaboration – Dementia Australia Research Foundation Pilot Grant to run the successful program that led to this trial.

The title of Dr Samtani's project is *A randomised controlled trial of a co-designed social cognitive skills intervention for older adults with cognitive concerns.*