



# The Pandemic Effect: A Social Isolation Report

OCTOBER 6, 2020

**AARP** Foundation<sup>®</sup>  
For a future without senior poverty.

**UNITED HEALTH FOUNDATION<sup>®</sup>**

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# Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred a rise in social isolation and loneliness\*, reaching epidemic proportions. Two-thirds of U.S. adults report experiencing social isolation and more than half (66%) agree that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused their anxiety level to increase, yet many are not turning to anyone for help.

Defined as having few social relationships or infrequent social contact with others – social isolation is a public health crisis. Studies have found that social isolation can be worse for one's health than obesity, and the health risks of prolonged isolation are equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. For adults who have experienced social isolation during the current pandemic, half (50%) report this social isolation has caused them to lack motivation, slightly more than four in 10 (41%) say it has made them feel more anxious than usual and slightly more than a third (37%) report it has made them feel depressed. Yet, only 11% of adults turned to a medical professional when feeling down or sad, and almost a third of adults 50+ reported that they did not look to anyone for support during the pandemic.

Among the 50+, almost a third of women (29%) report going as long as one to three months not interacting with others outside their home or workplace during the pandemic and are more likely to experience negative emotions than their male counterparts. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, women 50+ are more than twice as likely to report feeling overwhelmed (32% vs. 15% of men 50+), and more women than men 50+ report feeling anxious (46% vs. 36% of men 50+) and stressed (50% vs. 40% of men 50+).

Along with women 50+, the impact to low-income older adults (defined as those who have a household income less than \$40K and are 50+) has also been greater compared to older adults with high incomes (defined as those who have a household income \$75K+ and are 50+) Four in ten low-income adults 50+ report facing challenges accessing various resources during COVID-19, including a fifth who had challenges accessing food and a similar number who had challenges accessing healthcare services.

Key signs to identify if someone is at risk for social isolation are access to food, healthcare, transportation and other vital resources. But furthermore, it's connections, companionship, and a sense of belonging that we need as humans.

In a united effort, AARP Foundation and United Health Foundation offer a Risk Assessment platform at [Connect2Affect.org](https://Connect2Affect.org) to transform lives by helping individuals and their loved ones Connect2 support services in their area. They want everyone to start by answering, “how connected am I?” at [Connect2Affect.org](https://Connect2Affect.org).

# Methodology

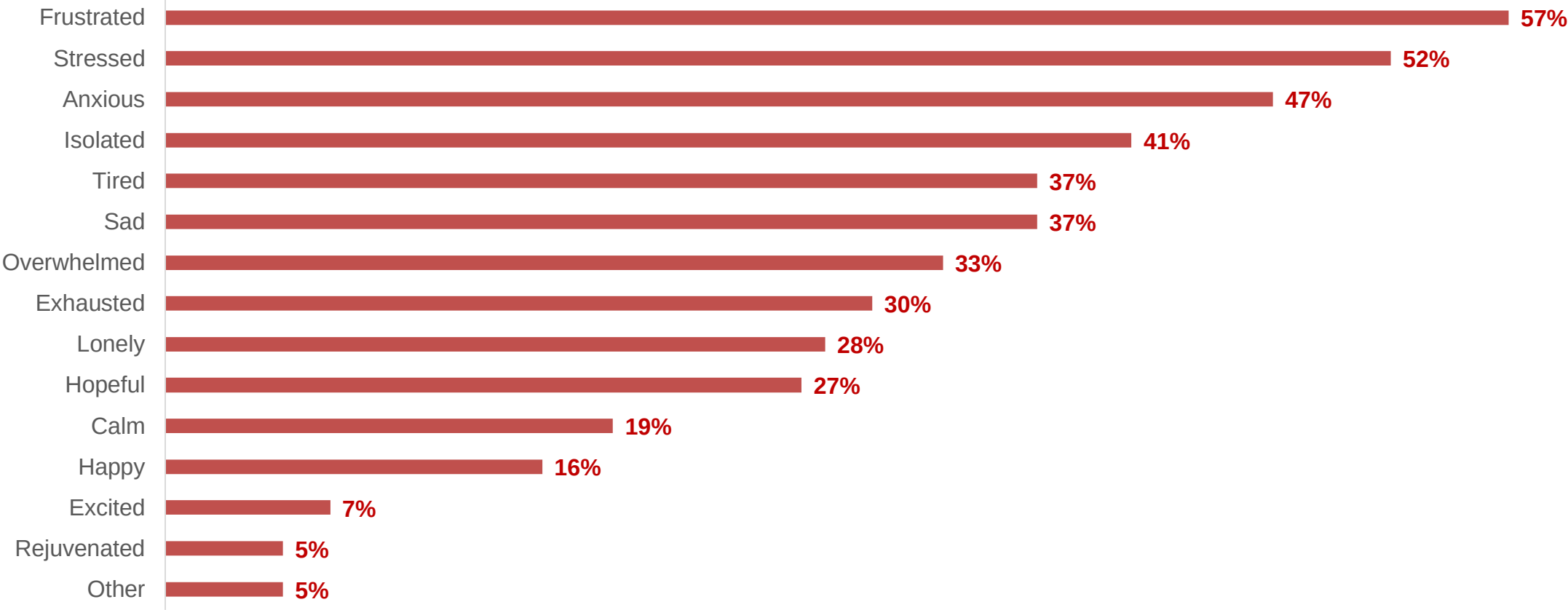
AARP Foundation and United Health Foundation, conducted an online survey among 2,010 U.S. adults ages 18-plus. It was fielded from August 21-25, 2020 by Ipsos and used quota targets for age, gender, region etc. to be nationally representative. The credibility interval associated with a 95% confidence interval is +/-2.5 percentage points for the total sample.

The study was designed to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adults of all ages, to understand levels of social isolation during the pandemic, and to assess knowledge of how social isolation can impact a person's health.

**ALL  
ADULTS**

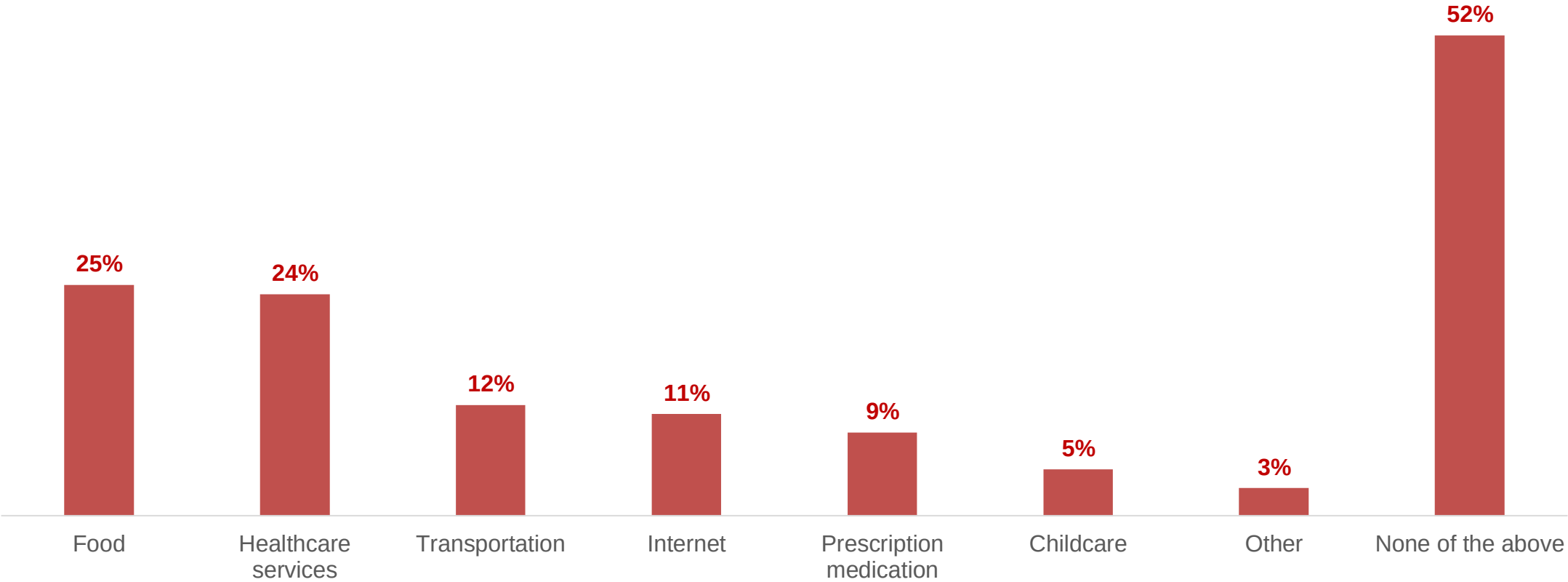


# Since the pandemic began, adults have mostly experienced negative emotions



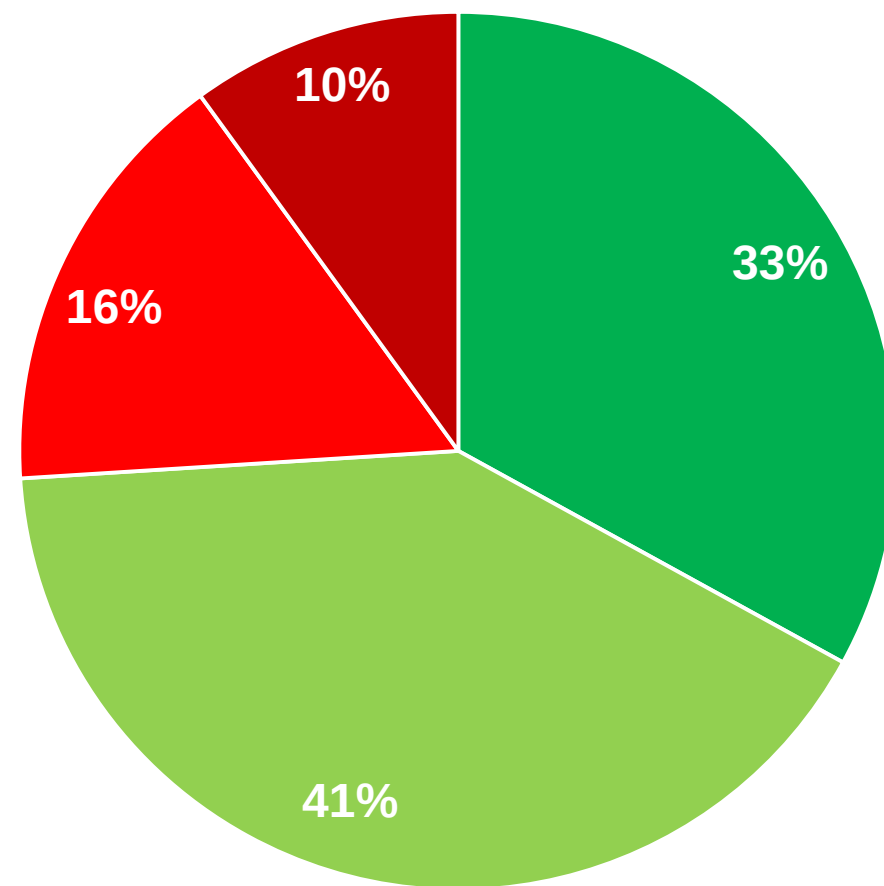
Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, which of the following emotions have you felt? Please select all that apply. (N=2,010)

And since the pandemic, almost half of adults have had challenges in accessing certain resources/services



Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, have you had challenges when trying to access any of the following? Please select all that apply. (N=2,010)

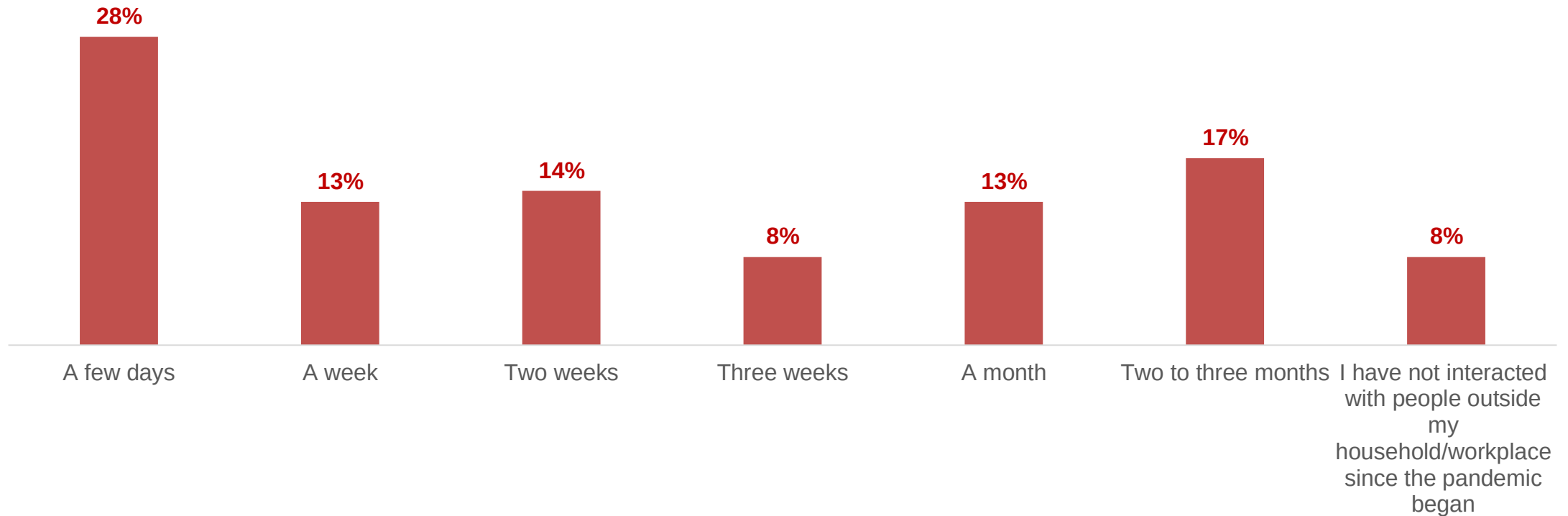
**More than seven in 10 adults agree that the pandemic has made it more difficult for them to connect with friends**



■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree

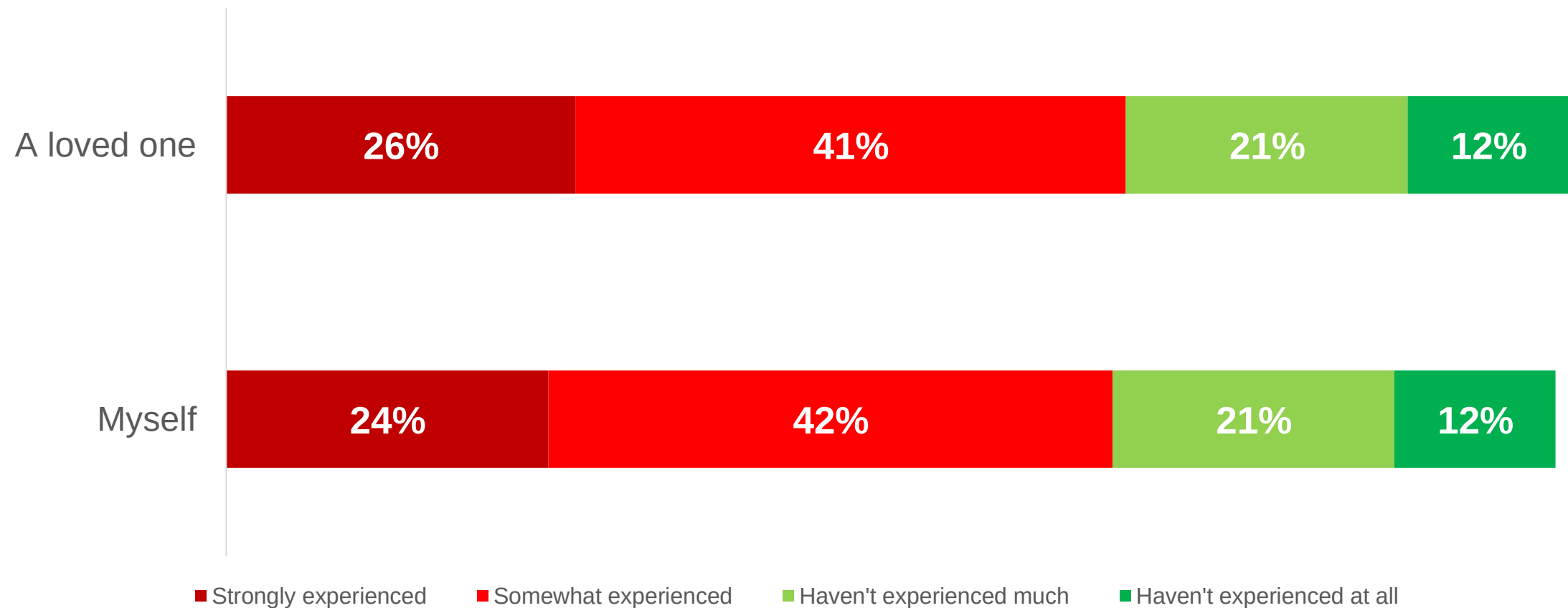
*Thinking about your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The pandemic has made it more difficult for me to connect with friends. (N=2,010)*

# Almost a third of adults report that the longest they've gone without interacting with other people outside their home or workplace during the pandemic was between 1 to 3 months



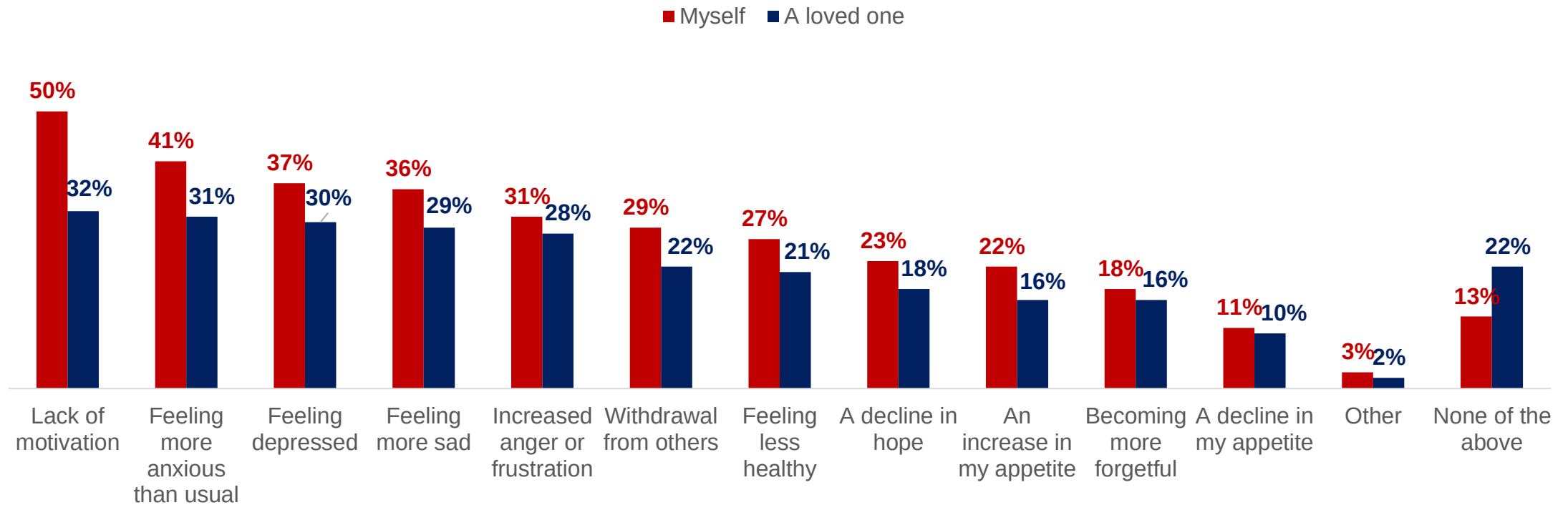
*Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, what is the longest time you have gone without interacting with other people outside of your household and your workplace? (N=2,010)*

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, two thirds of adults report having experienced social isolation, and around the same amount also reports that a loved one has experienced social isolation as well



Thinking about the definition of social isolation that you just read, to what extent have you or a loved one experienced social isolation since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic? (N=2,010)

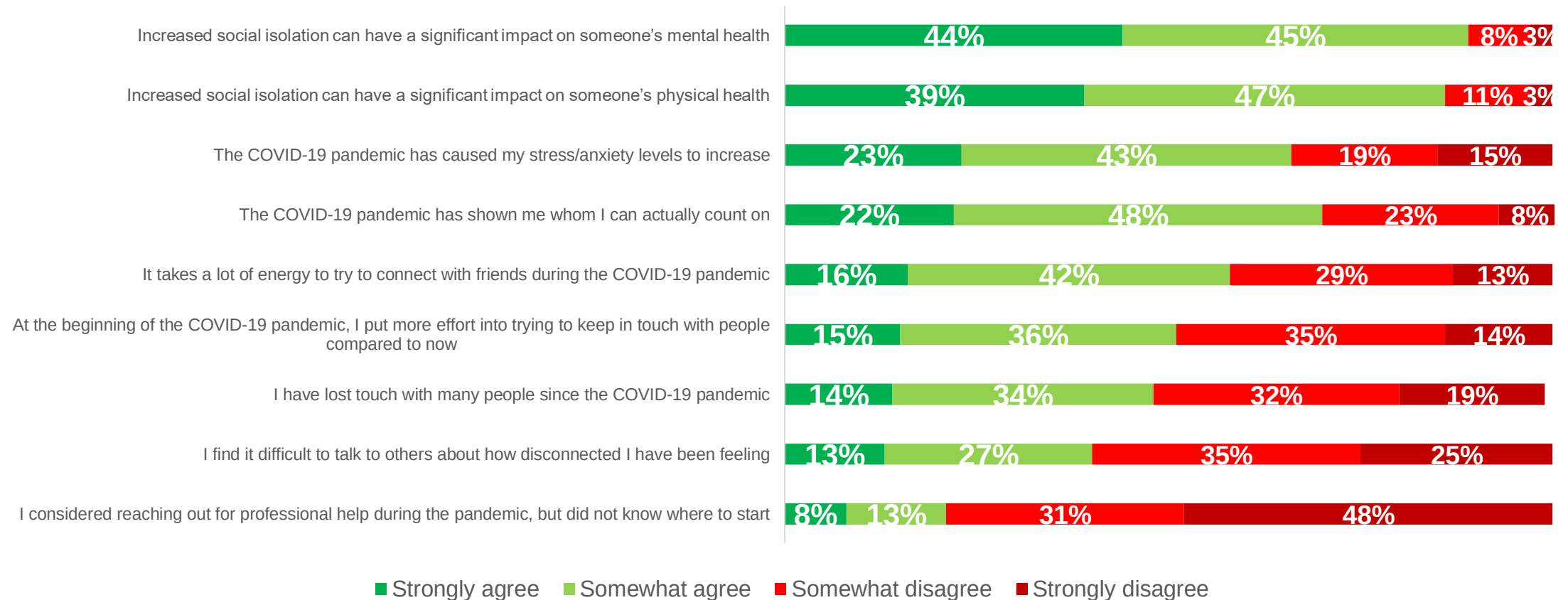
# A majority of those experiencing, or those describing a loved one experiencing, social isolation also report other negative feelings



*Because of social isolation, what kind of changes have you seen in yourself? Please select all that apply (N=1,310)*

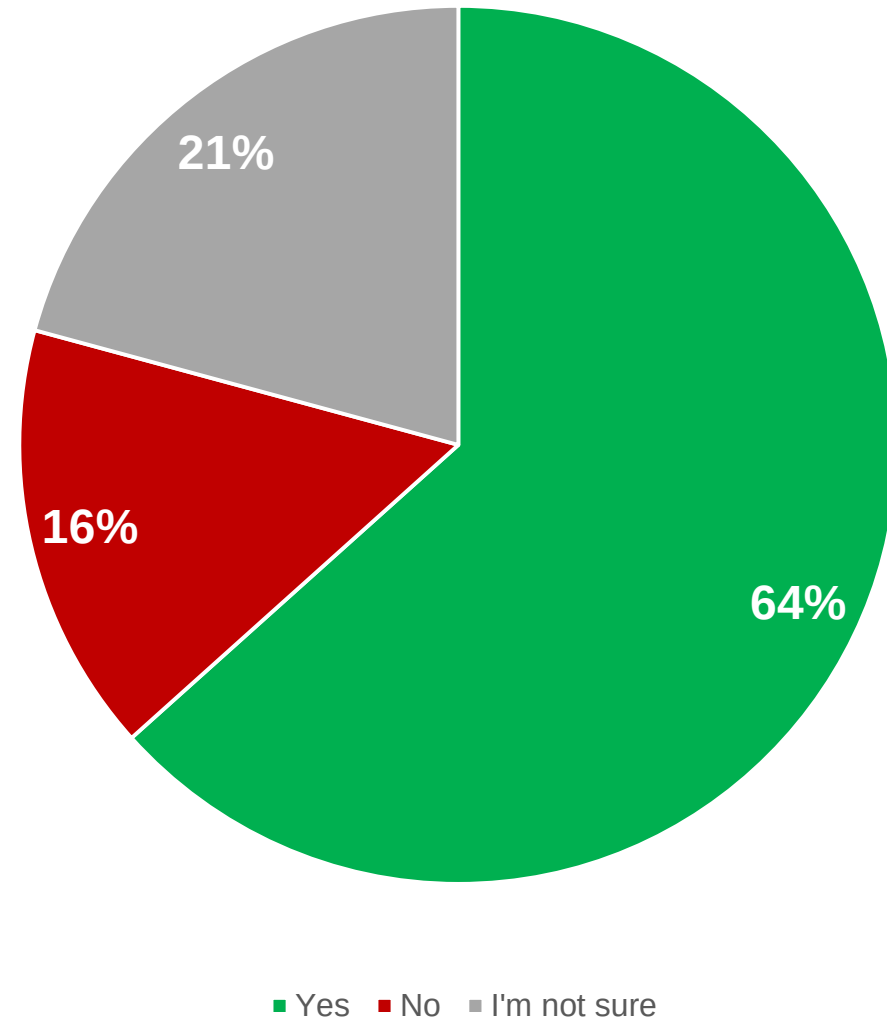
*Because of social isolation, what kind of changes have you seen in your loved one? Please select all that apply. (N=1,325)*

# Adults are aware that increased social isolation can have an impact on someone's mental and physical health, and two thirds agree that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused their stress/anxiety levels to increase



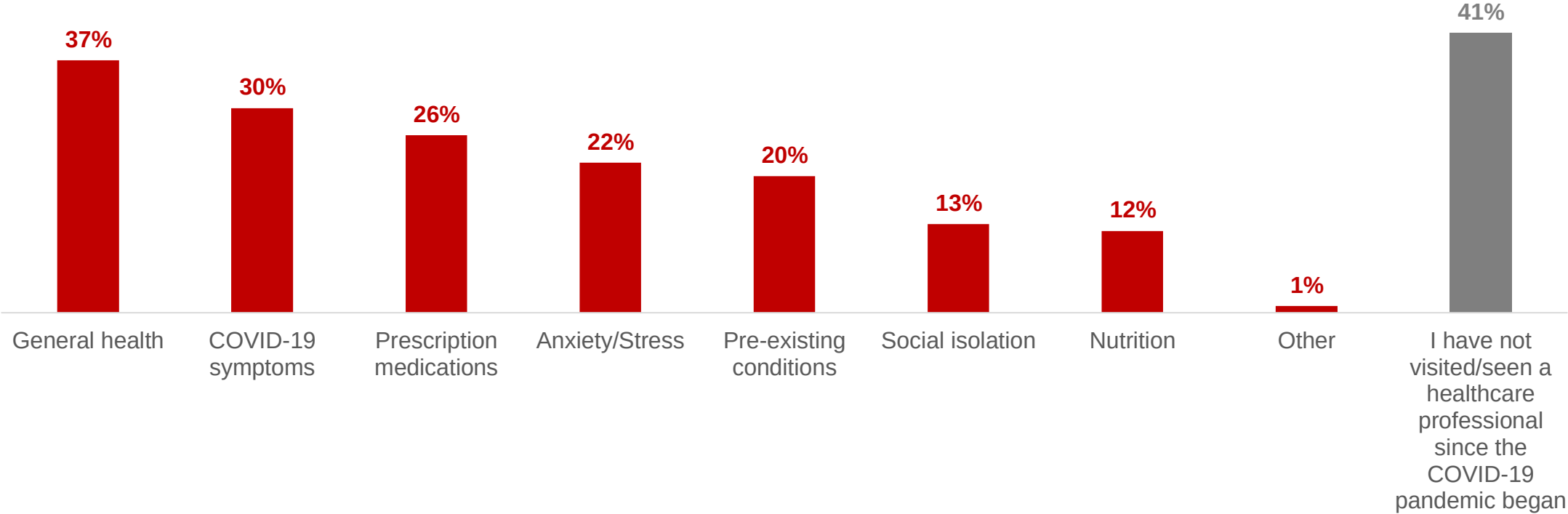
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (N=2,010)

**And almost two thirds are aware that social isolation can increase the risk for certain health conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure, or sleep disorders**



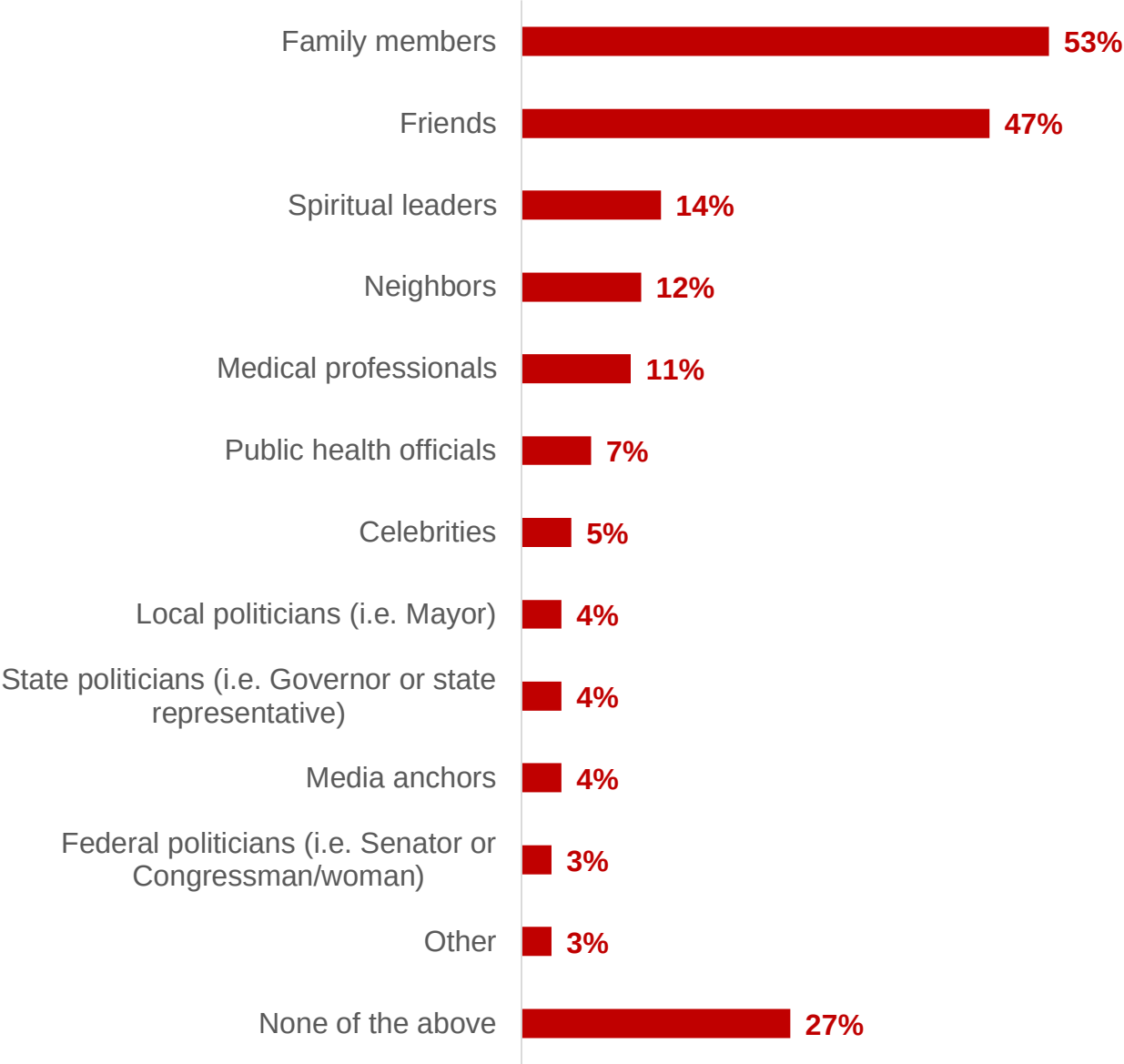
*Do you think that social isolation can increase your risk for health conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure or sleep disorders? (N=2,010)*

But social isolation isn't one of the topics that pops up during recent visits to health care professionals since the start of the pandemic



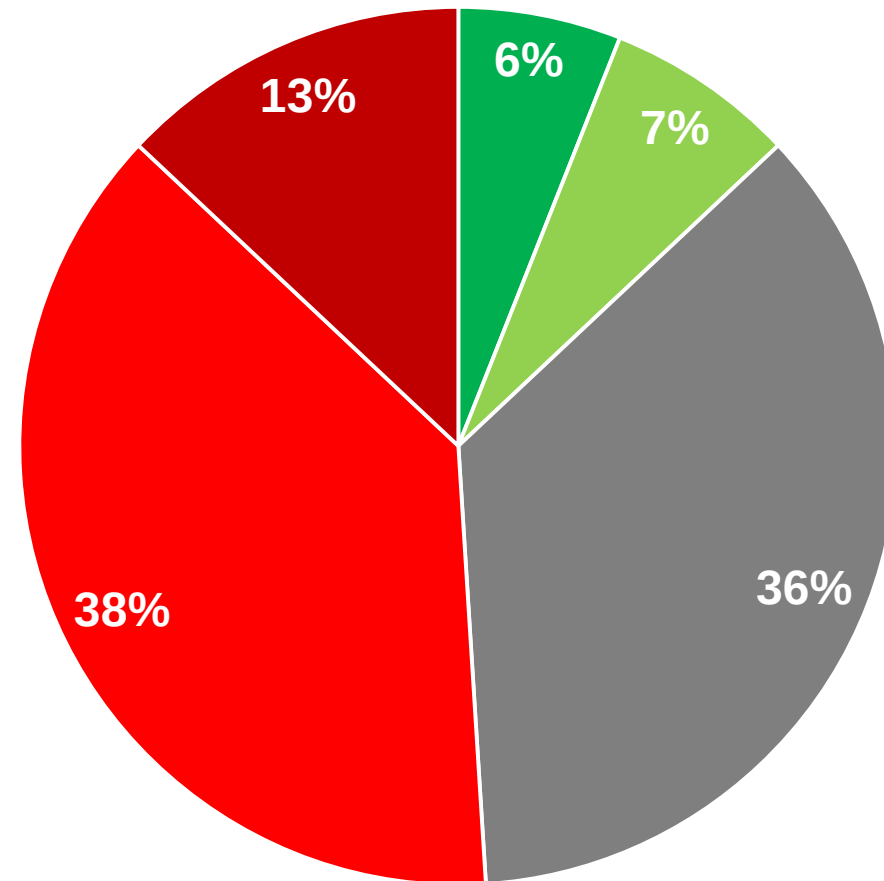
Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, has a healthcare professional asked you about any of the following during an in-person or virtual visit? Please select all that apply. (N=2,010)

When it comes to people they turn to during the pandemic, adults tend to look to their family members and friends when they feel down or sad



Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, some people may have experienced times when they felt down or sad. At times when you might have felt down or sad, what type of people have you looked to for hope? Please select all that apply. (N=2,010)

**More than half of adults report that if we continue to have social-distancing guidelines during the winter holidays it will have a negative impact on their mental well-being**



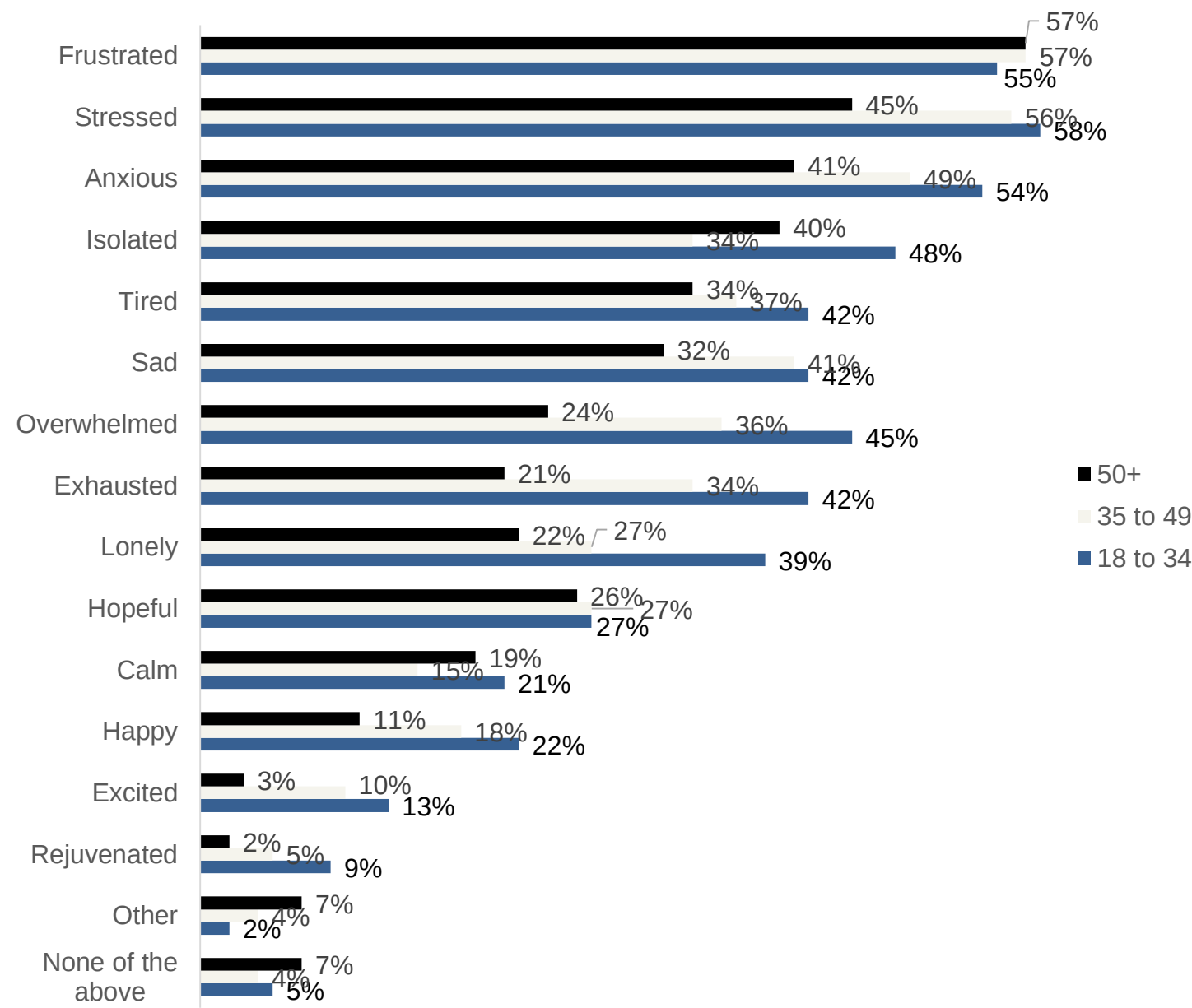
■ Very positive ■ Somewhat positive ■ No impact ■ Somewhat negative ■ Very negative

*Thinking about the future, if we continue to have social-distancing guidelines during the winter holidays (i.e. Thanksgiving), what impact do you foresee it having on your mental well-being? (N=2,010)*

**BY AGE**

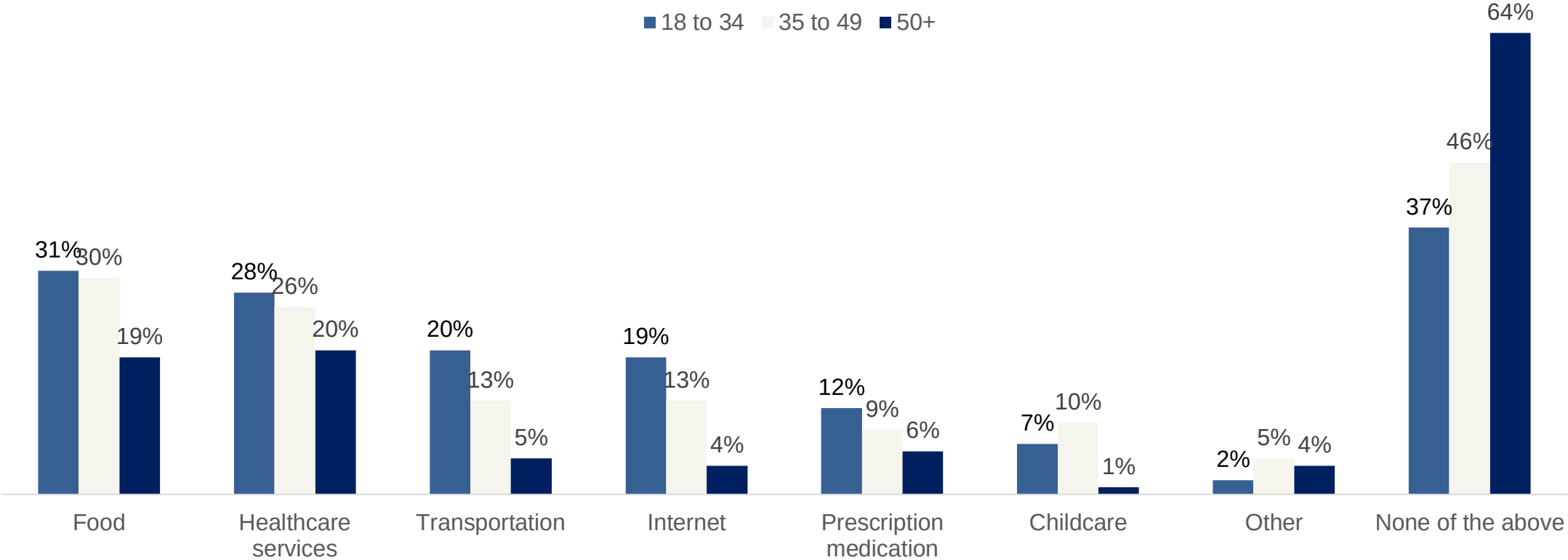


Younger generations are more likely to report feeling stressed and isolated since the COVID-19 pandemic began



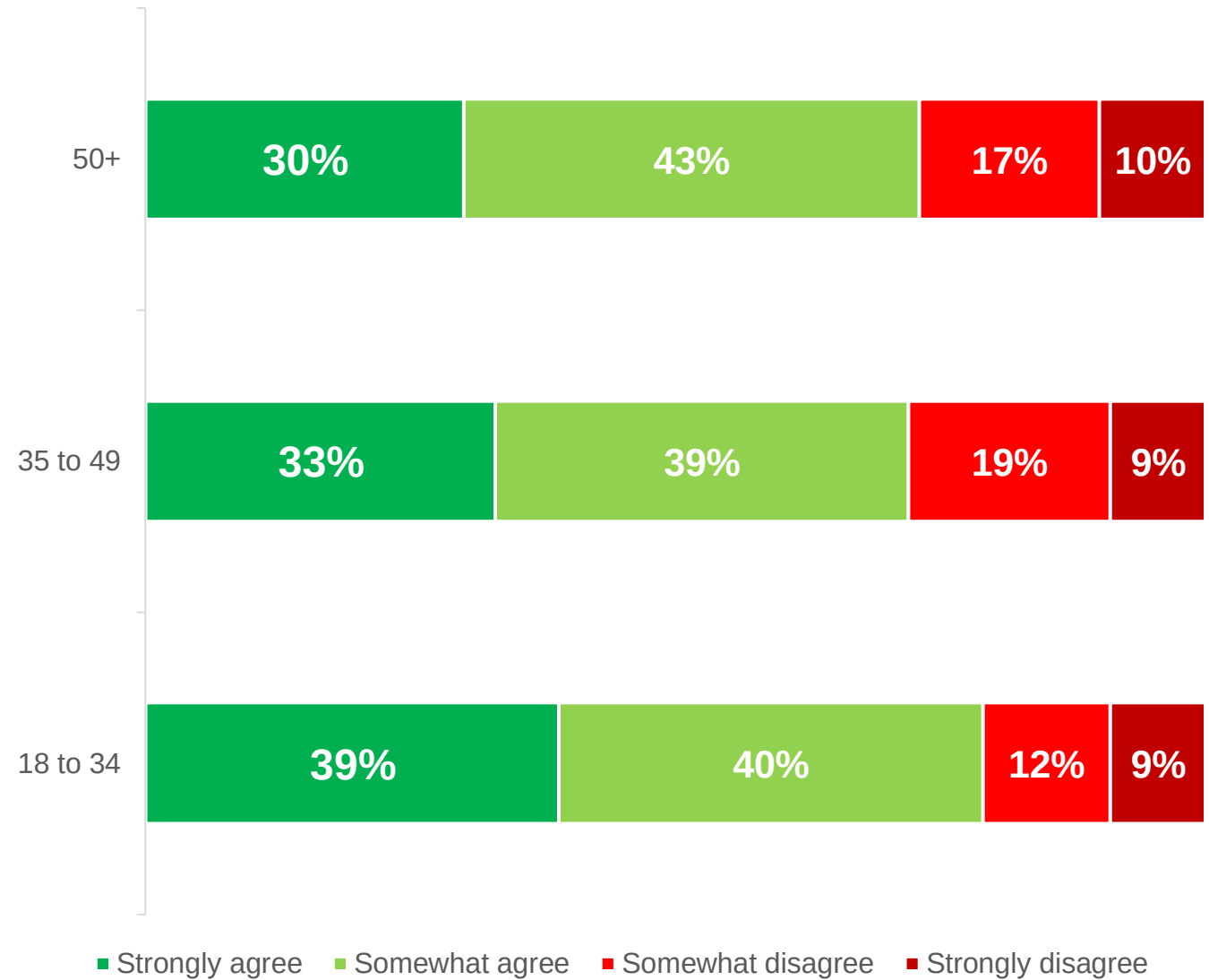
Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, which of the following emotions have you felt? Please select all that apply.  
(N=985 age 50+, N=528 age 35-49, N=497 age 18-34).

And since the pandemic, more than six in 10 adults aged 18 to 34 report facing challenges in accessing some resources/services



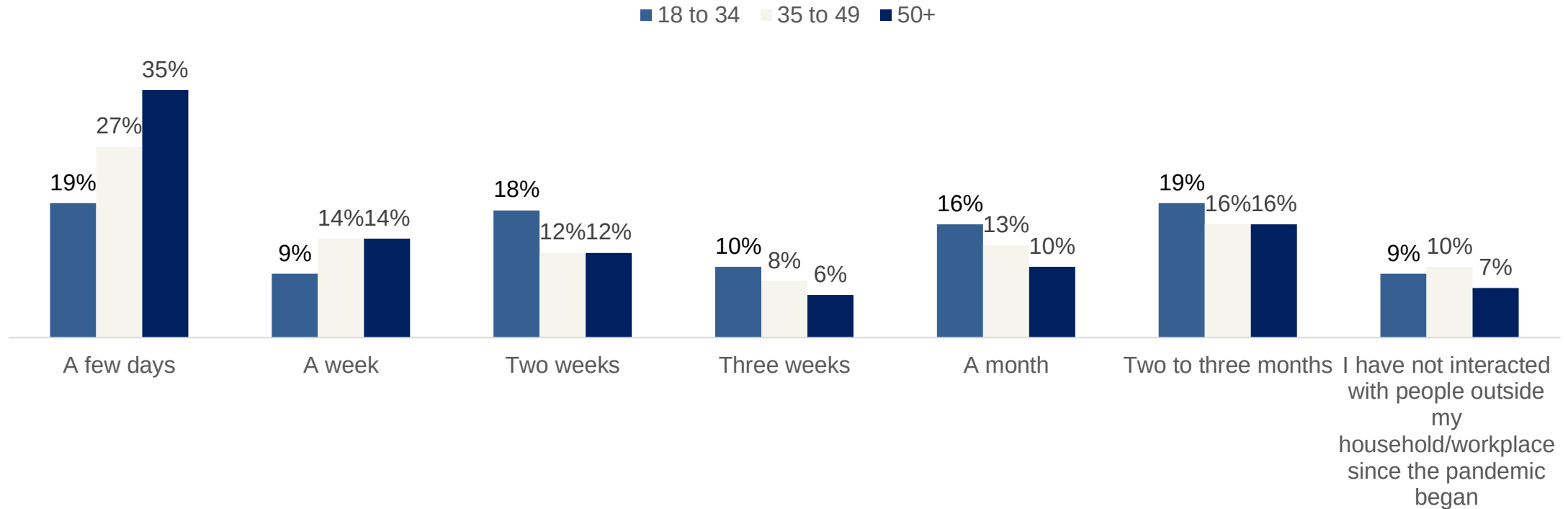
Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, have you had challenges when trying to access any of the following? Please select all that apply.  
(N=985 age 50+, N=528 age 35-49, N=497 age 18-34).

**No matter their age,  
most adults agree that  
the pandemic has made  
it more difficult for them  
to connect with friends**



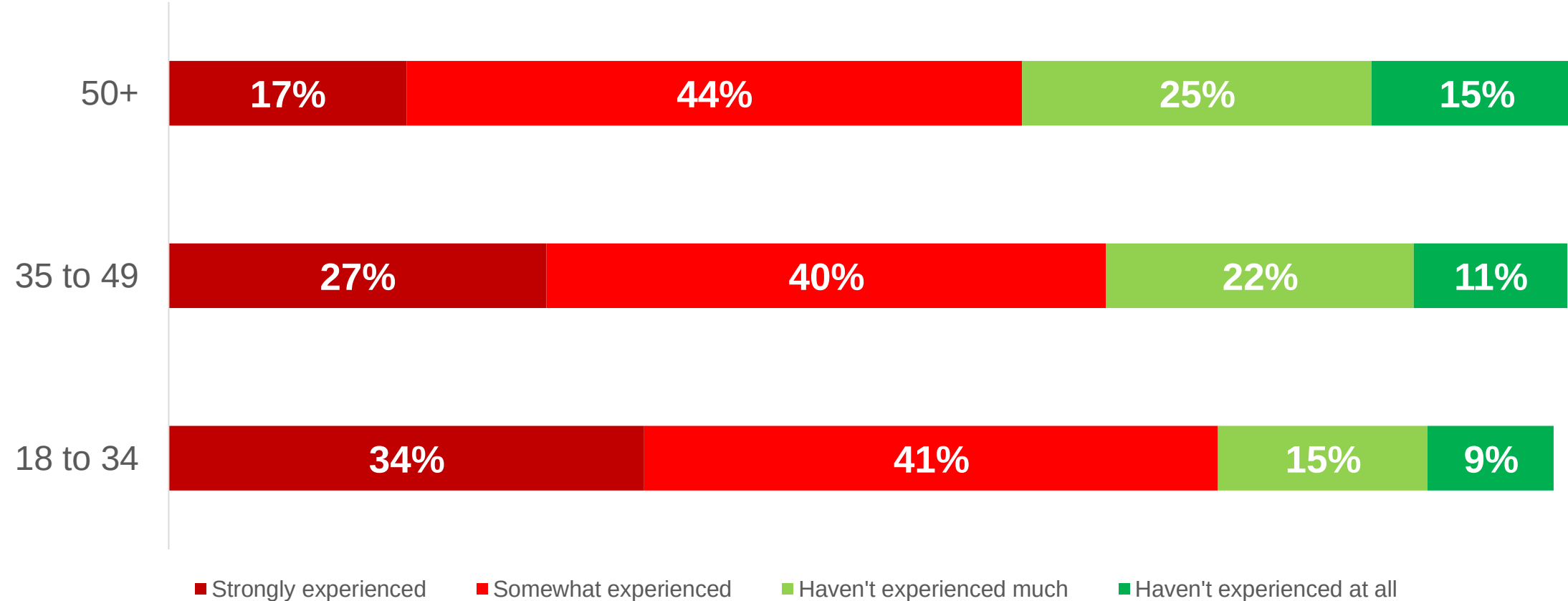
*Thinking about your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The pandemic has made it more difficult for me to connect with friends. (N=985 age 50+, N=528 age 35-49, N=497 age 18-34).*

# Adults 50+ are more likely to report that the longest they've gone without interacting with other people since the start of the pandemic was just a few days



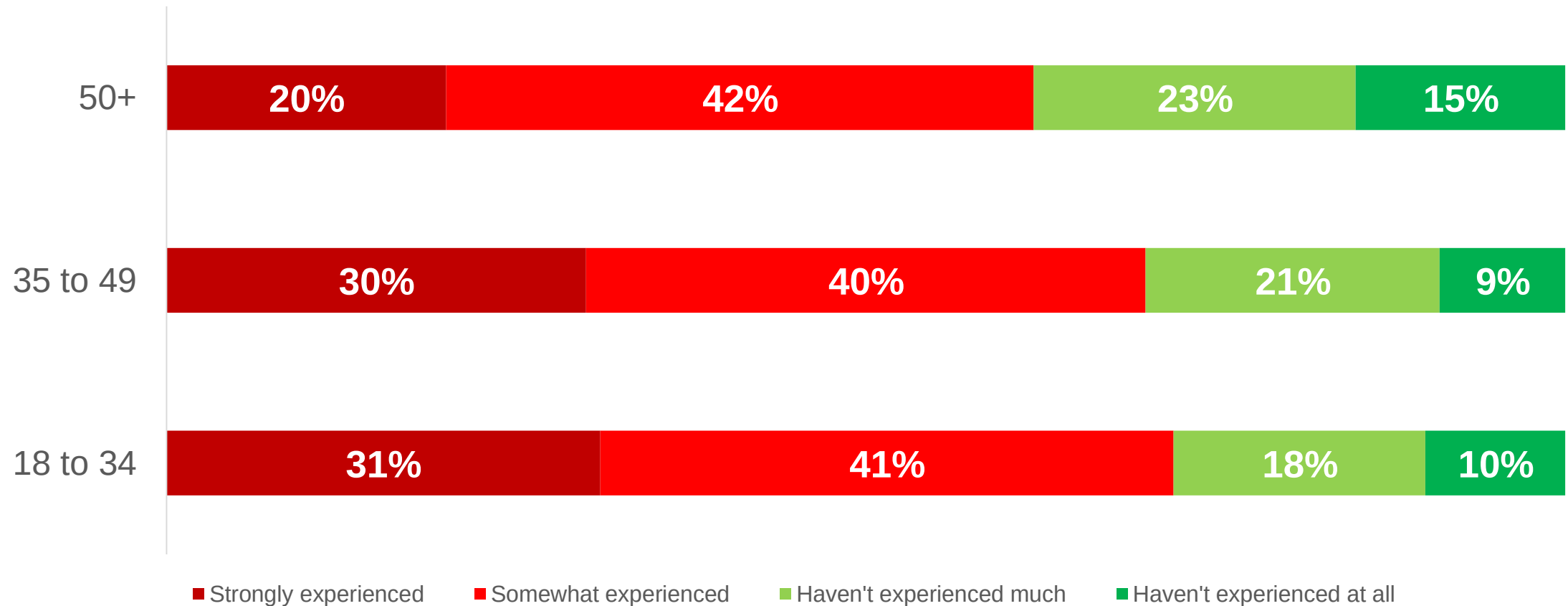
Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, what is the longest time you have gone without interacting with other people outside of your household and your workplace? (N=985 age 50+, N=528 age 35-49, N=497 age 18-34).

More than six in 10 adults 50+ report experiencing social isolation since the pandemic began; however, those 18 to 34 are more likely to report experiencing this



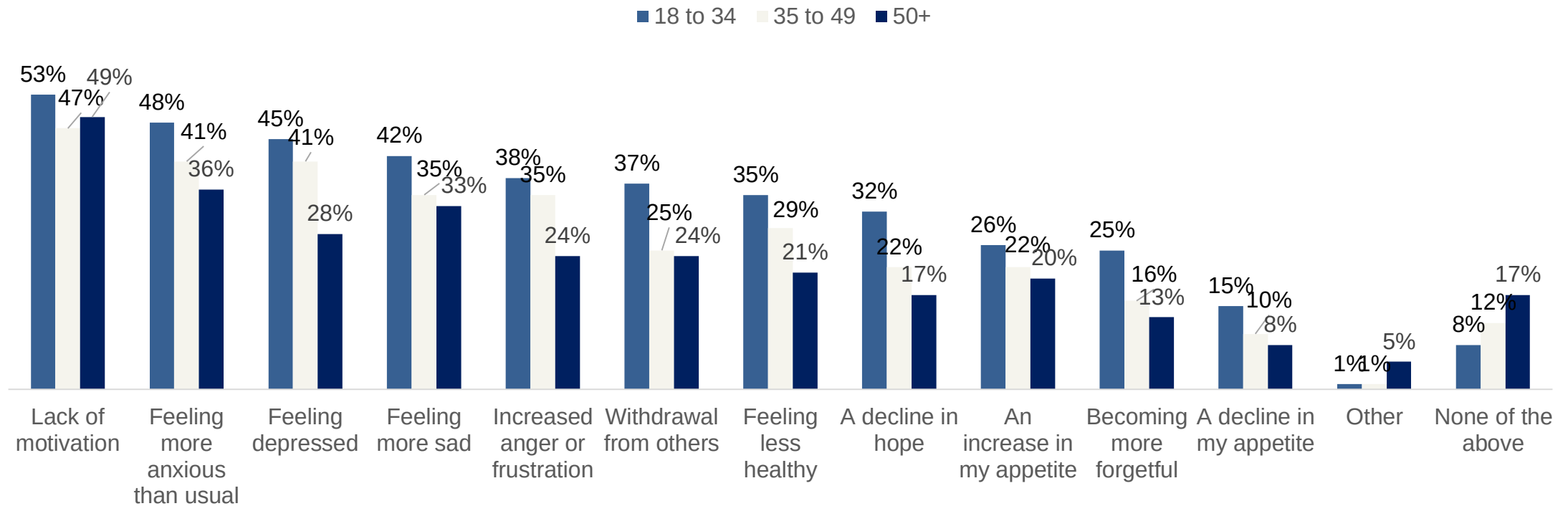
Thinking about the definition of social isolation that you just read, to what extent have you or a loved one experienced social isolation since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic? (N=985 age 50+, N=528 age 35-49, N=497 age 18-34).

## More than six in 10 adults, at varying levels by age, have noticed their loved ones experiencing social isolation since the beginning of the pandemic



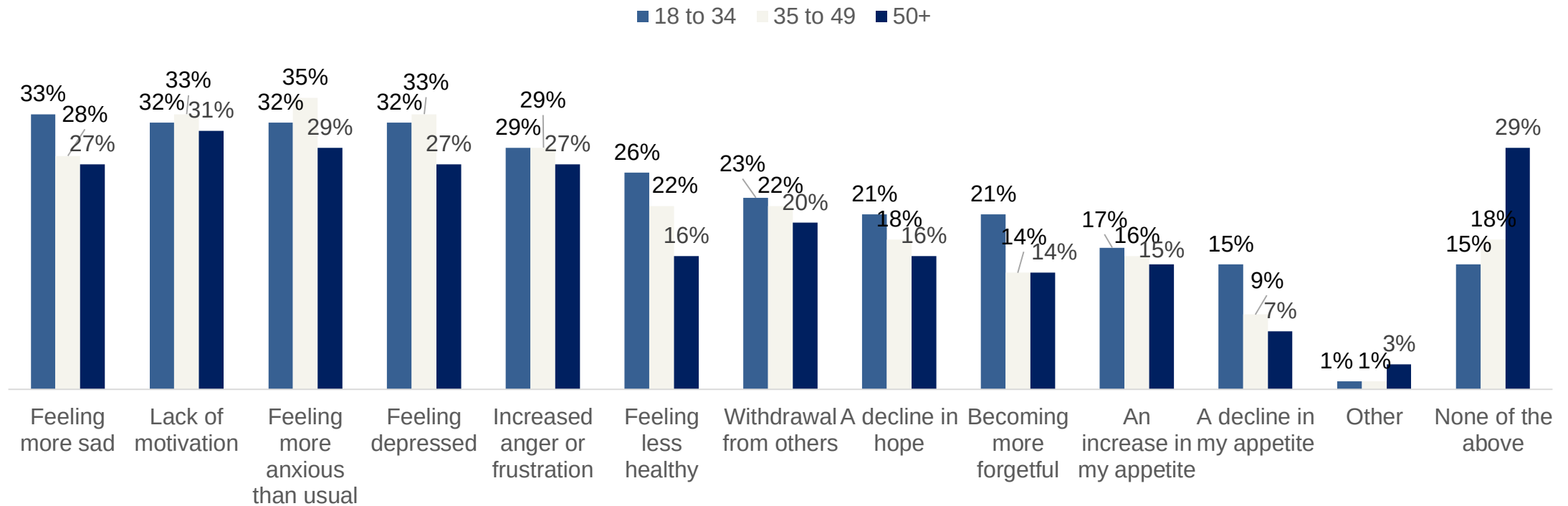
*Thinking about the definition of social isolation that you just read, to what extent have you or a loved one experienced social isolation since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic? (N=985 age 50+, N=528 age 35-49, N=497 age 18-34).*

# Lack of motivation is the most common change across generations among those who have experienced social isolation during the pandemic



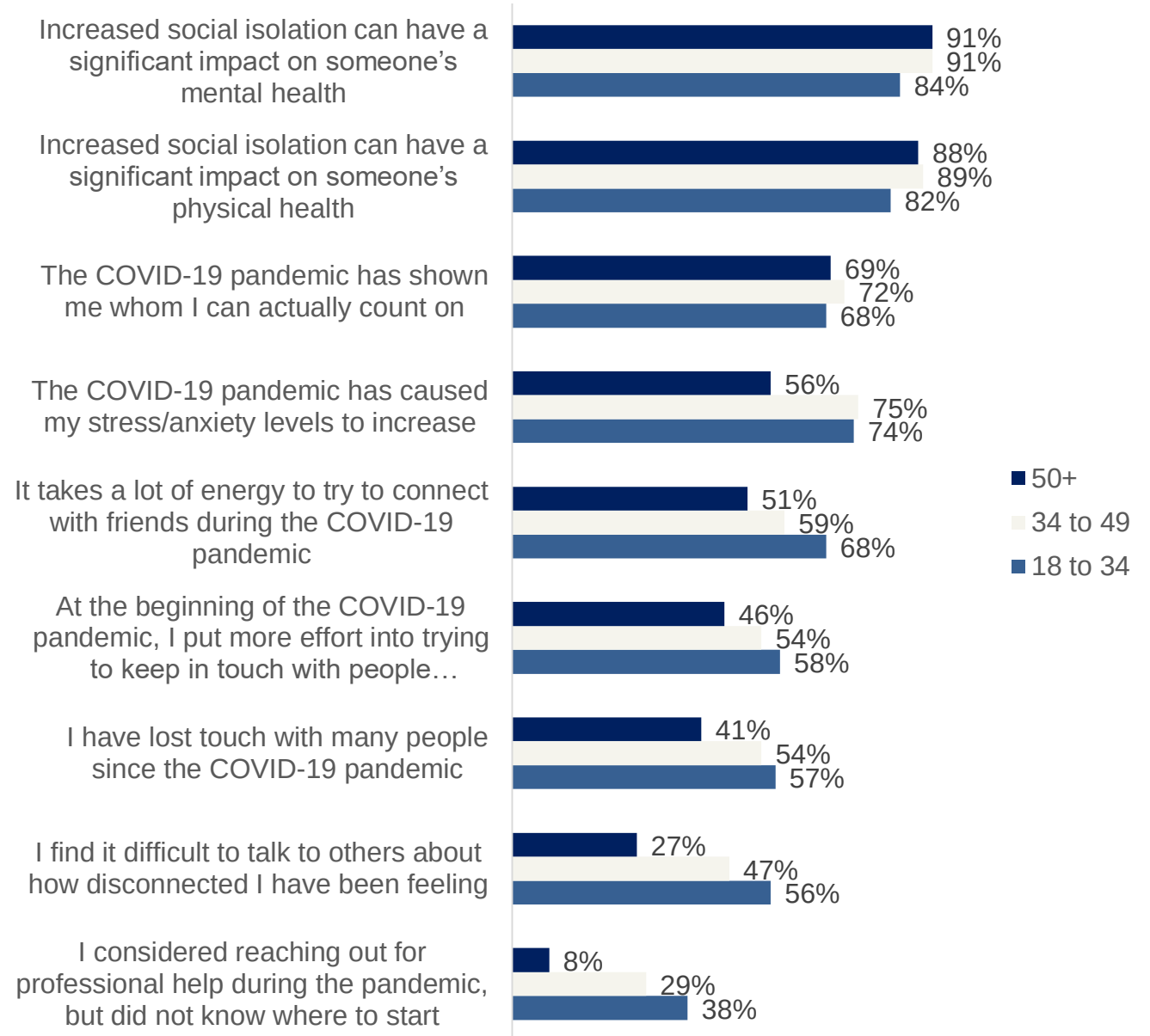
Because of social isolation, what kind of changes have you seen in yourself? Please select all that apply. (N=582 age 50+, N=357 age 35-49, N=371 age 18-34).

# Older adults are more likely than younger adults to say their loved ones who are experiencing social isolation during the pandemic are not experiencing any of the changes listed



Because of social isolation, what kind of changes have you seen in your loved one? Please select all that apply. (N=595 age 50+, N=365 age 35-49, N=365 age 18-34).

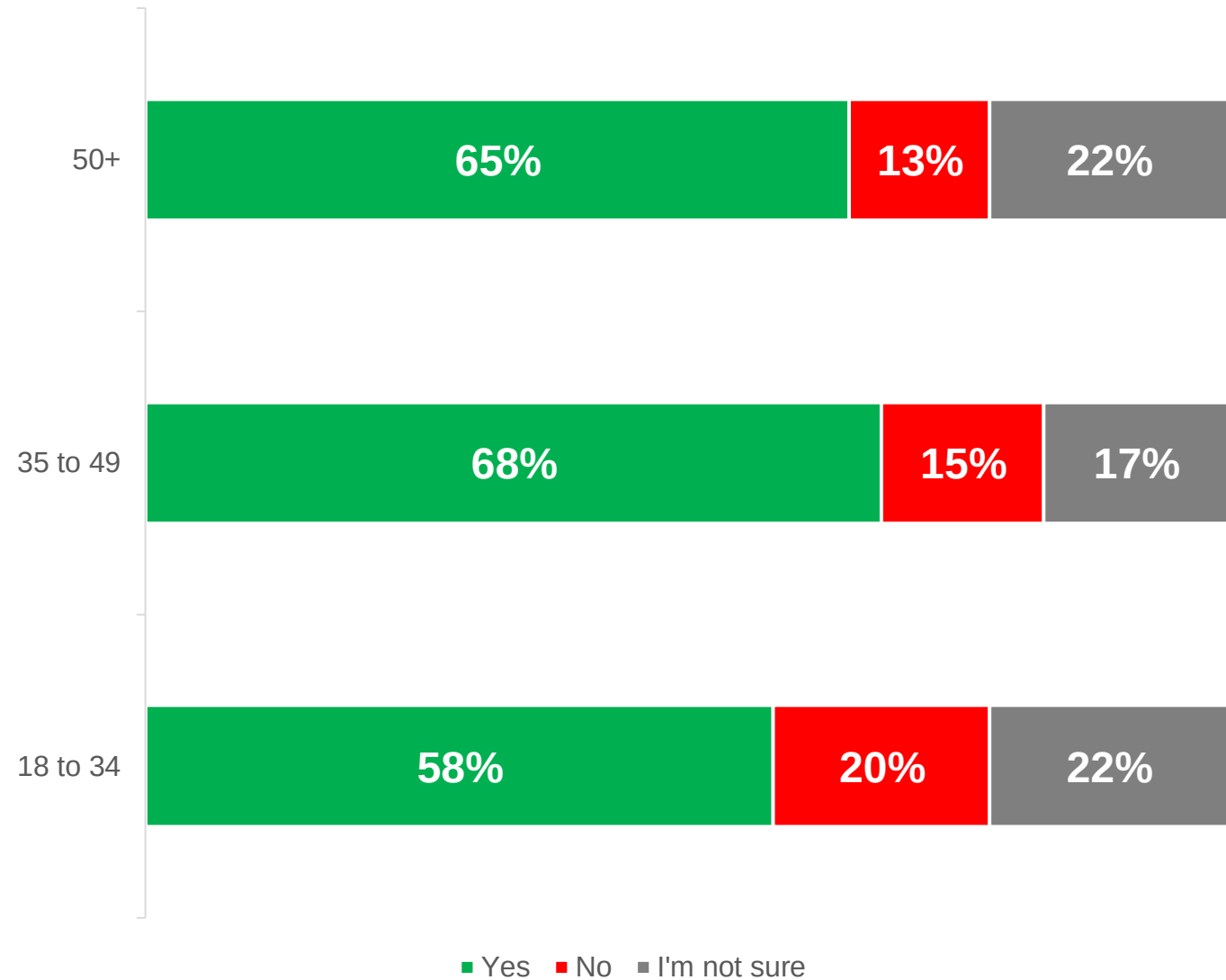
**While most adults under 50 are aware of the significant impact social isolation can have on someone's mental and physical health, they are more likely than those 50+ to have difficulty talking with others about feeling disconnected or to not know where to start when considering reaching out for professional help**



*Note: Data in chart reflects respondents who strongly agree or somewhat agree with each statement.*

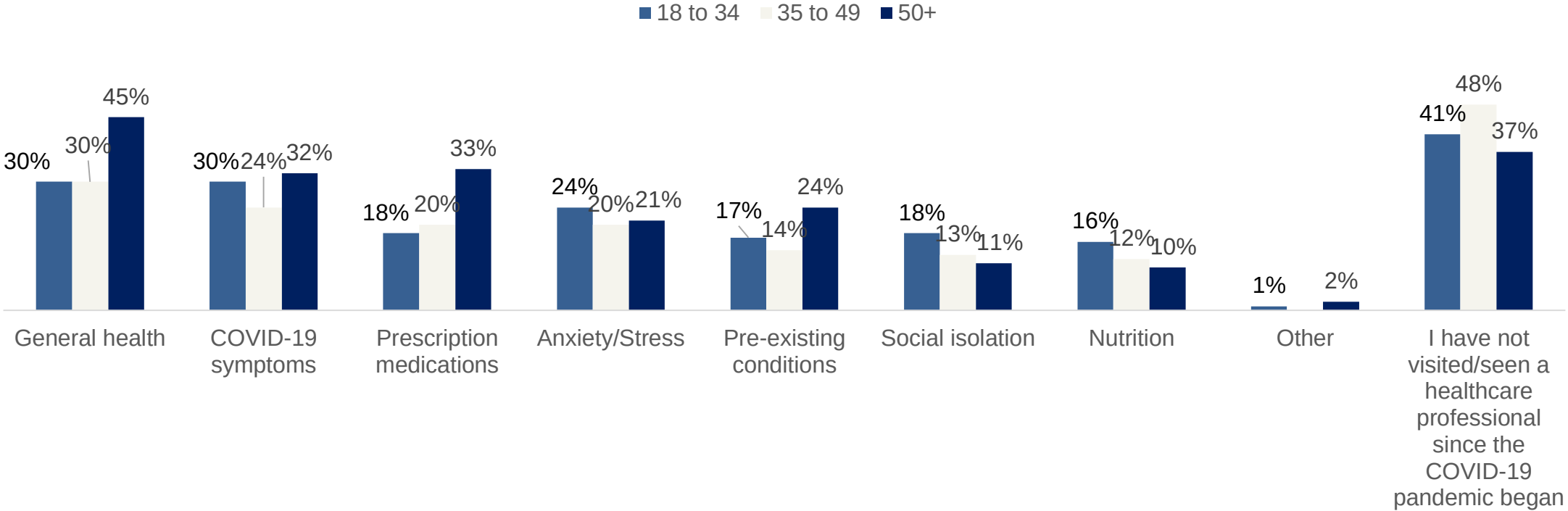
*To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (N=985 age 50+, N=528 age 35-49, N=497 age 18-34).*

**Regardless of age, more than half of adults are aware that social isolation can increase the risk for certain health conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure, or sleep disorders**



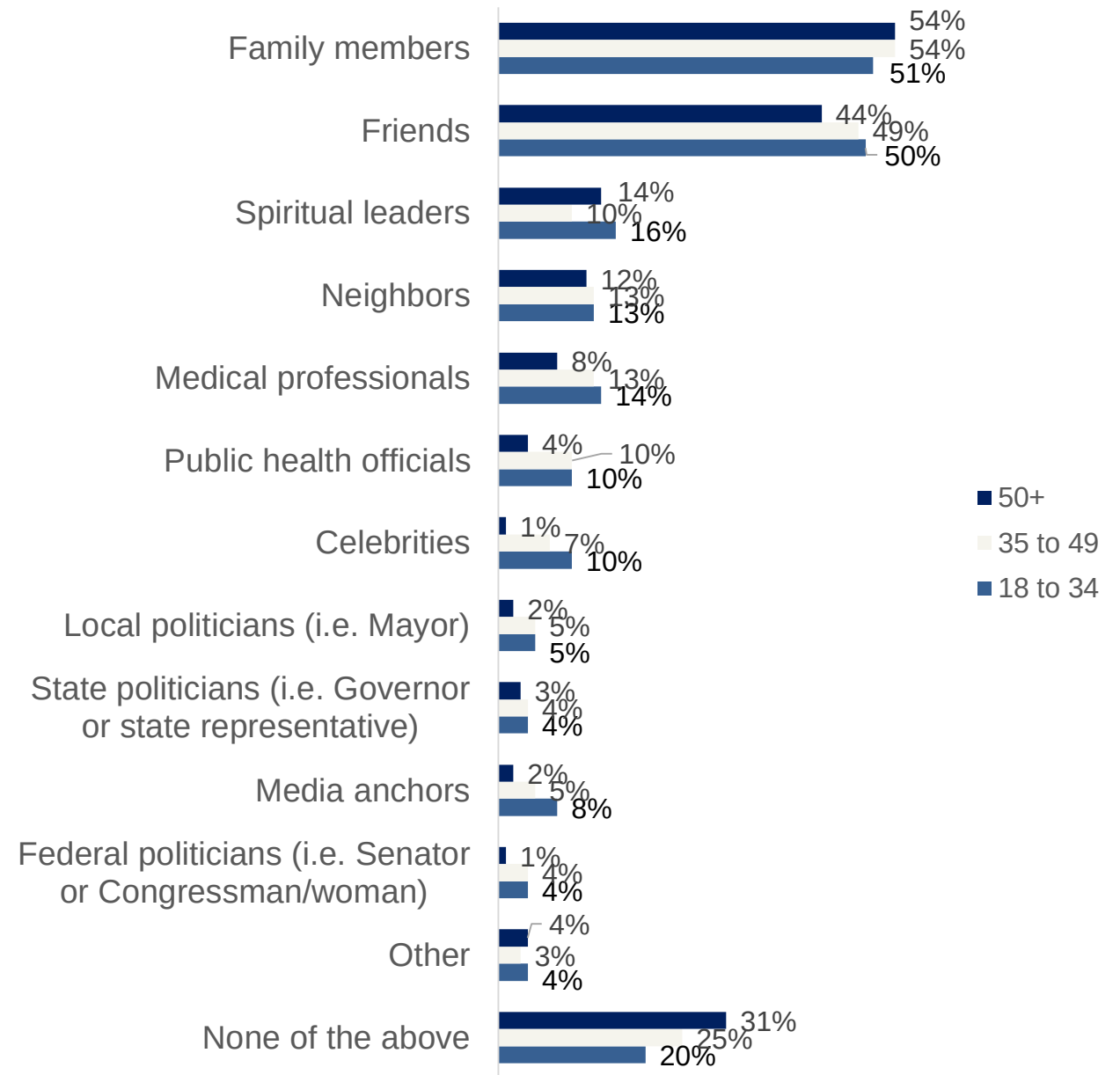
*Do you think that social isolation can increase your risk for health conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure or sleep disorders? (N=985 age 50+, N=528 age 35-49, N=497 age 18-34).*

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, social isolation is rarely asked about during doctor visits, regardless of one's age



Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, has a healthcare professional asked you about any of the following during an in-person or virtual visit? Please select all that apply. (N=985 age 50+, N=528 age 35-49, N=497 age 18-34).

**Regardless of age, over the course of the pandemic, adults look to family members and friends when they've felt down or sad**



Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, some people may have experienced times when they felt down or sad. At times when you might have felt down or sad, what type of people have you looked to for hope? Please select all that apply. (N=985 age 50+, N=528 age 35-49, N=497 age 18-34).

**If social distancing guidelines continue during the winter holidays, about half of adults think it will have a negative impact on their mental well-being, regardless of age**

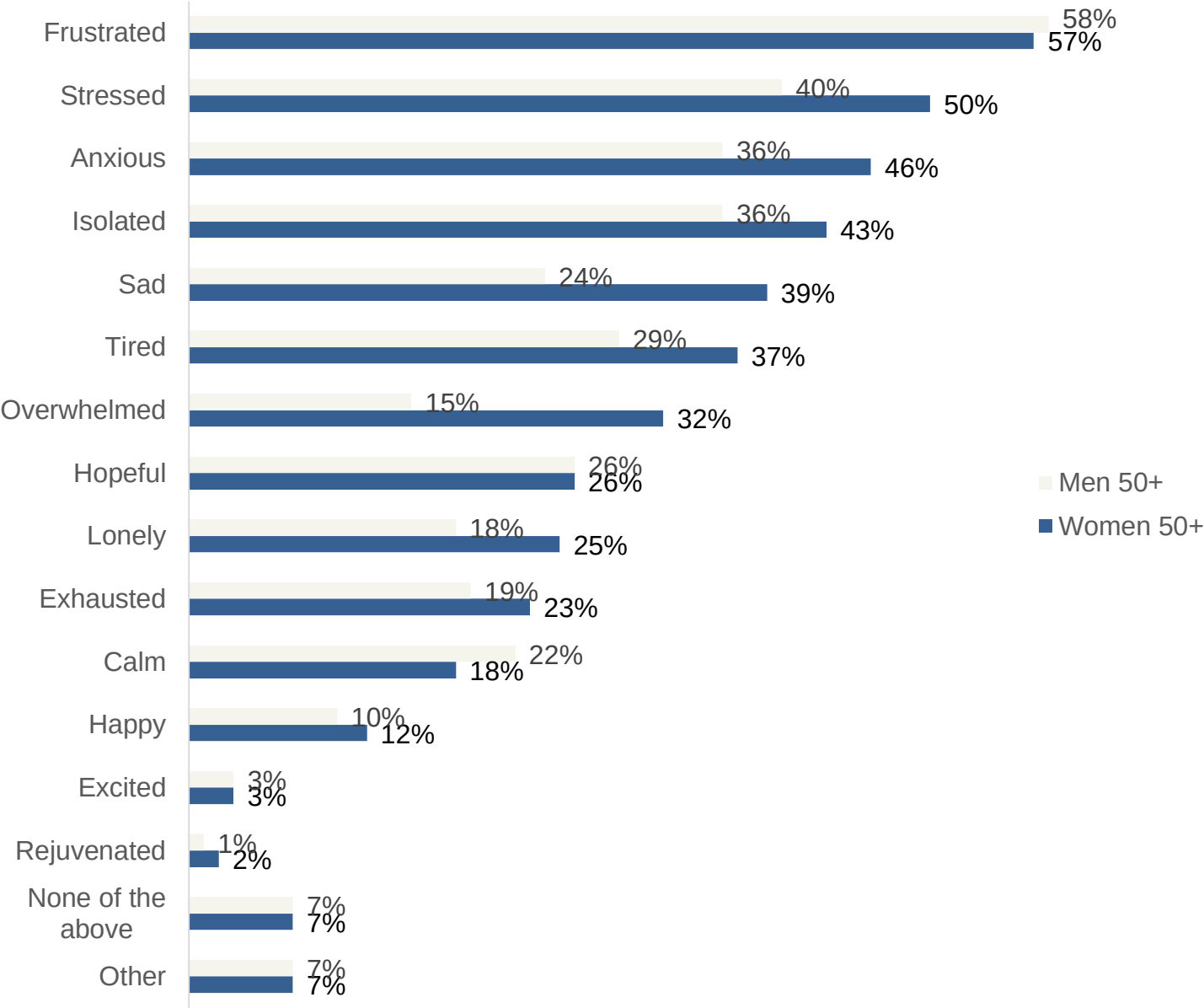


*Thinking about the future, if we continue to have social-distancing guidelines during the winter holidays (i.e. Thanksgiving), what impact do you foresee it having on your mental well-being? (N=985 age 50+, N=528 age 35-49, N=497 age 18-34).*

# 50+ BY GENDER

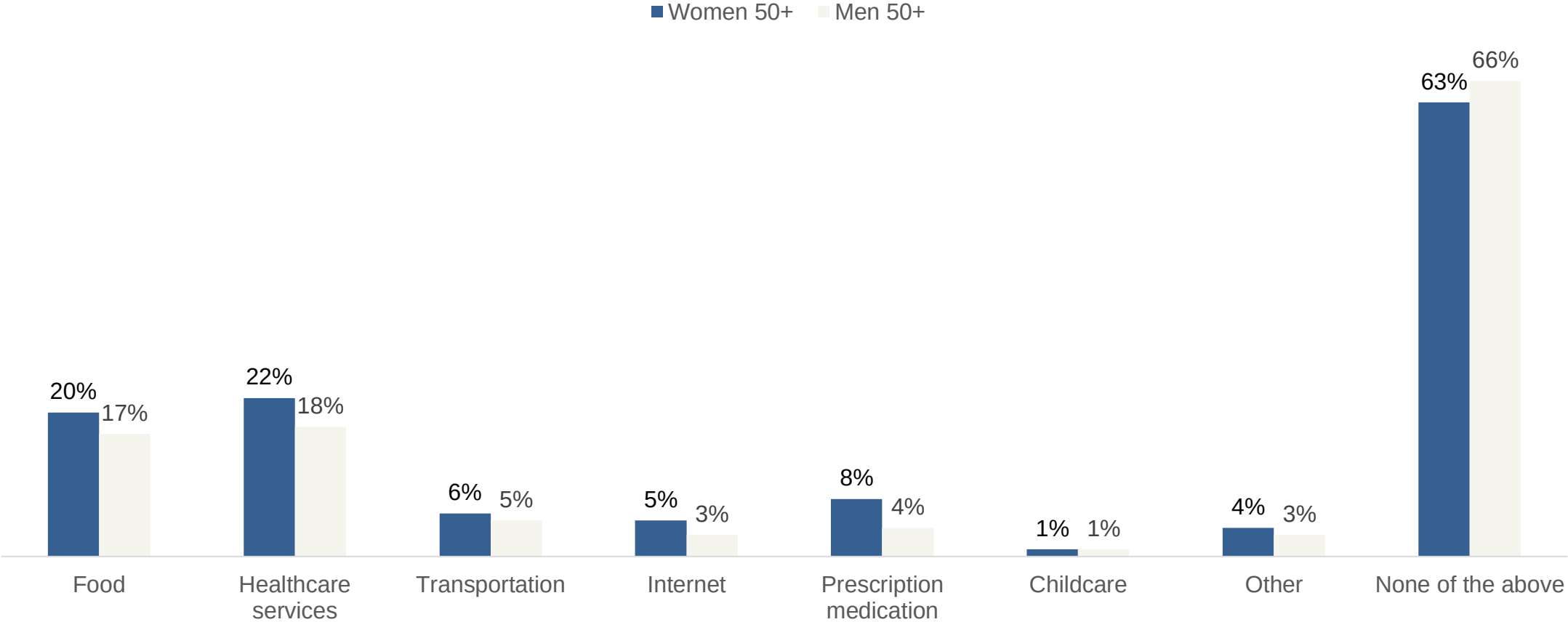


Among adults 50+, women are more likely than men to report having felt most of the negative emotions listed since the COVID-19 pandemic began



Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, which of the following emotions have you felt? Please select all that apply. (N=469 Men 50+, N=516 Women 50+).

And since the pandemic, almost a quarter of women 50+ report having challenges with accessing healthcare services



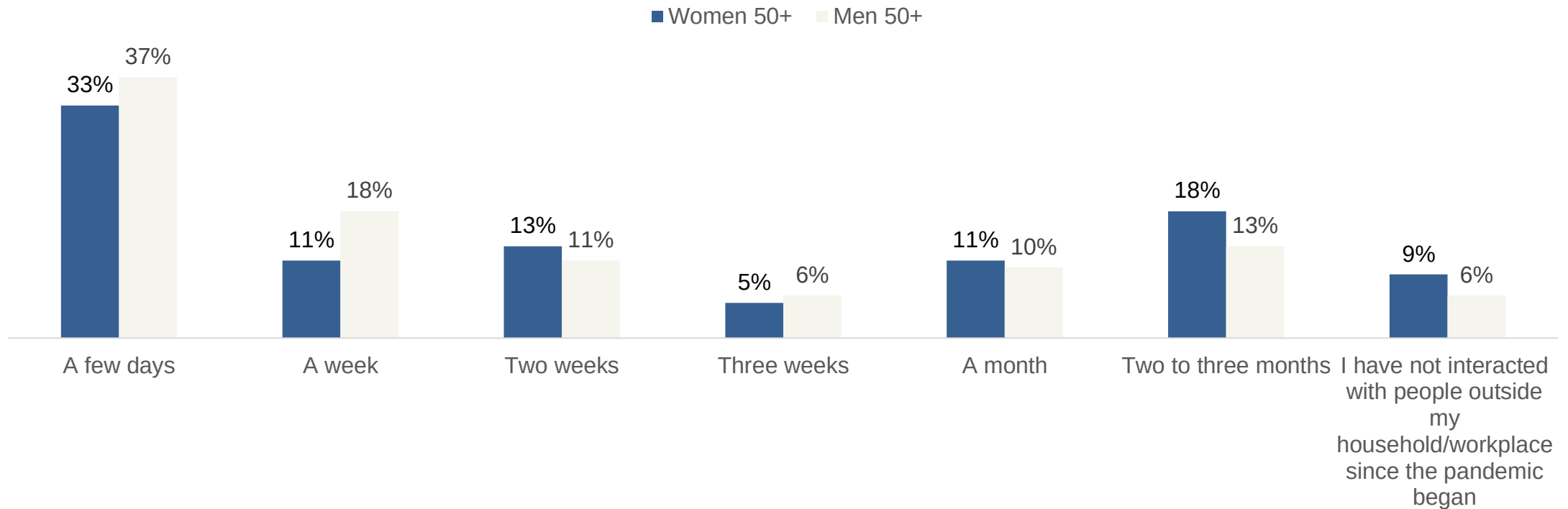
Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, have you had challenges when trying to access any of the following? Please select all that apply.  
(N=469 Men 50+, N=516 Women 50+).

**No matter their gender,  
women and men 50+ have  
had difficulty staying  
connected with their friends  
during the pandemic**



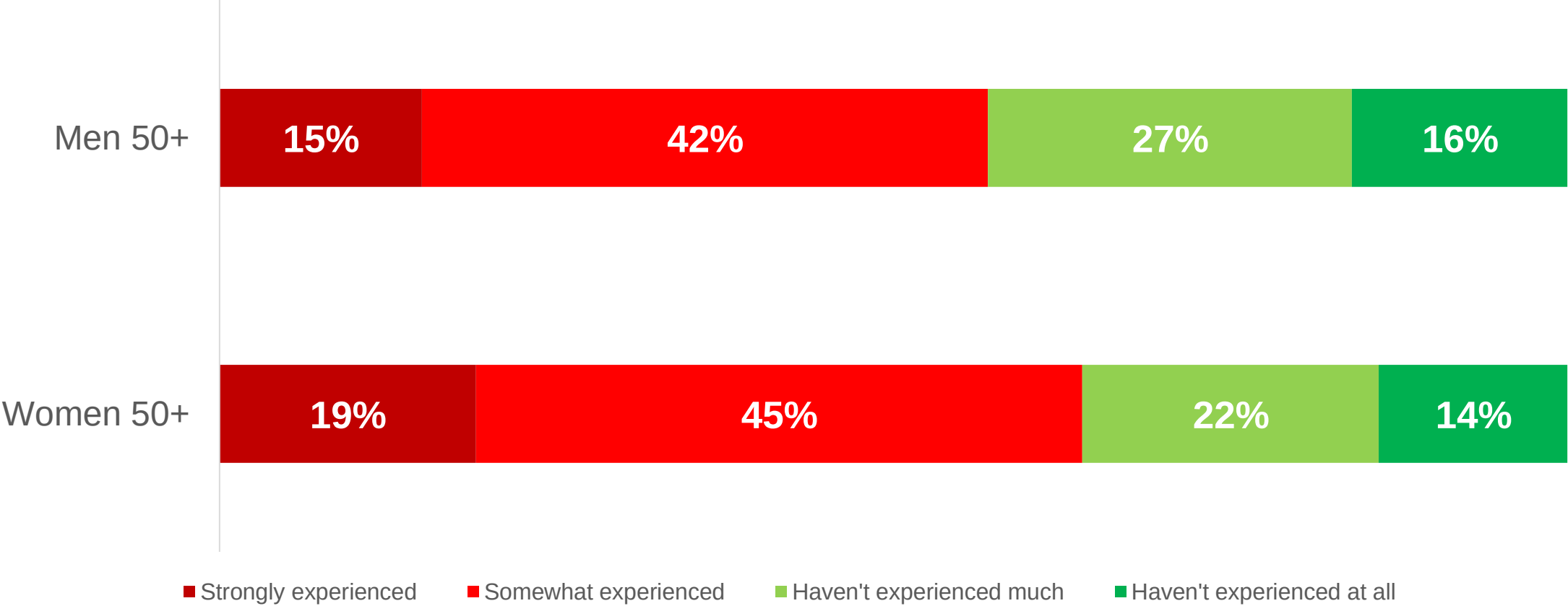
*Thinking about your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The pandemic has made it more difficult for me to connect with friends. (N=469 Men 50+, N=516 Women 50+).*

## Almost three in 10 women 50+ report their longest time not interacting with others since the start of the pandemic is one to three months



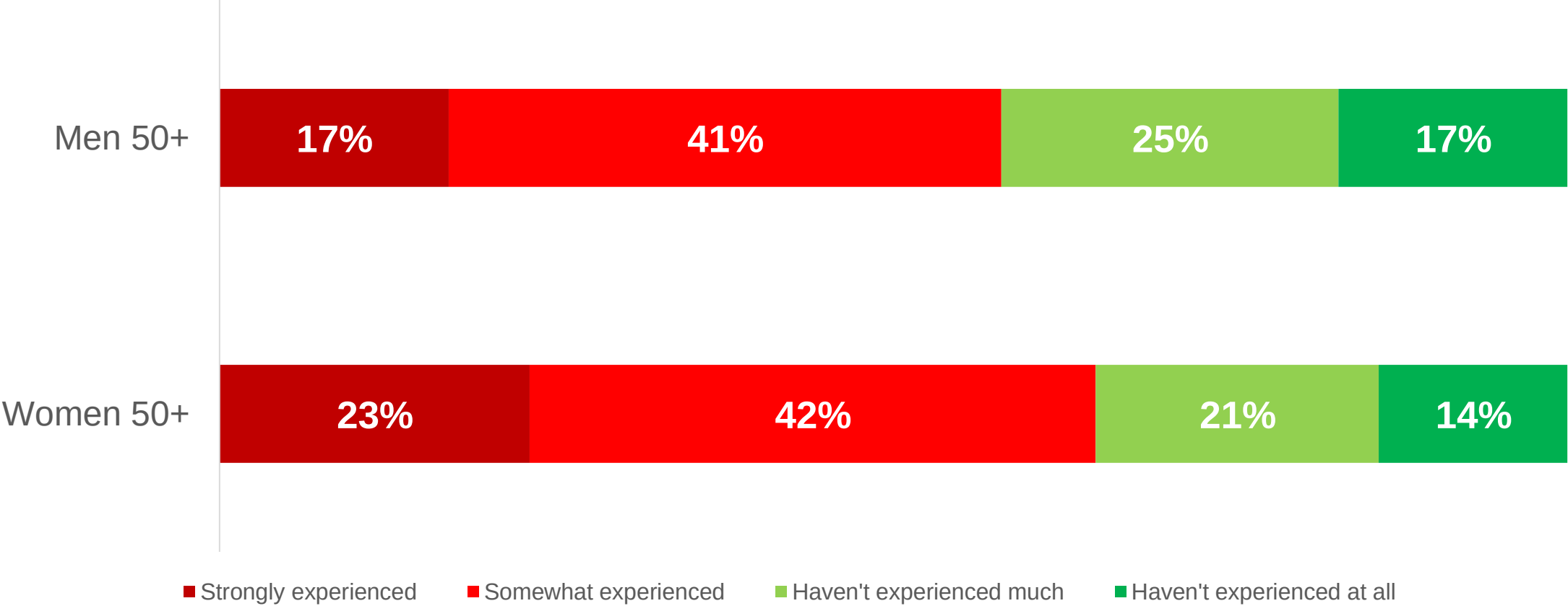
Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, what is the longest time you have gone without interacting with other people outside of your household and your workplace? (N=469 Men 50+, N=516 Women 50+).

# Regardless of gender, over half of adults 50+ report experiencing social isolation during the pandemic



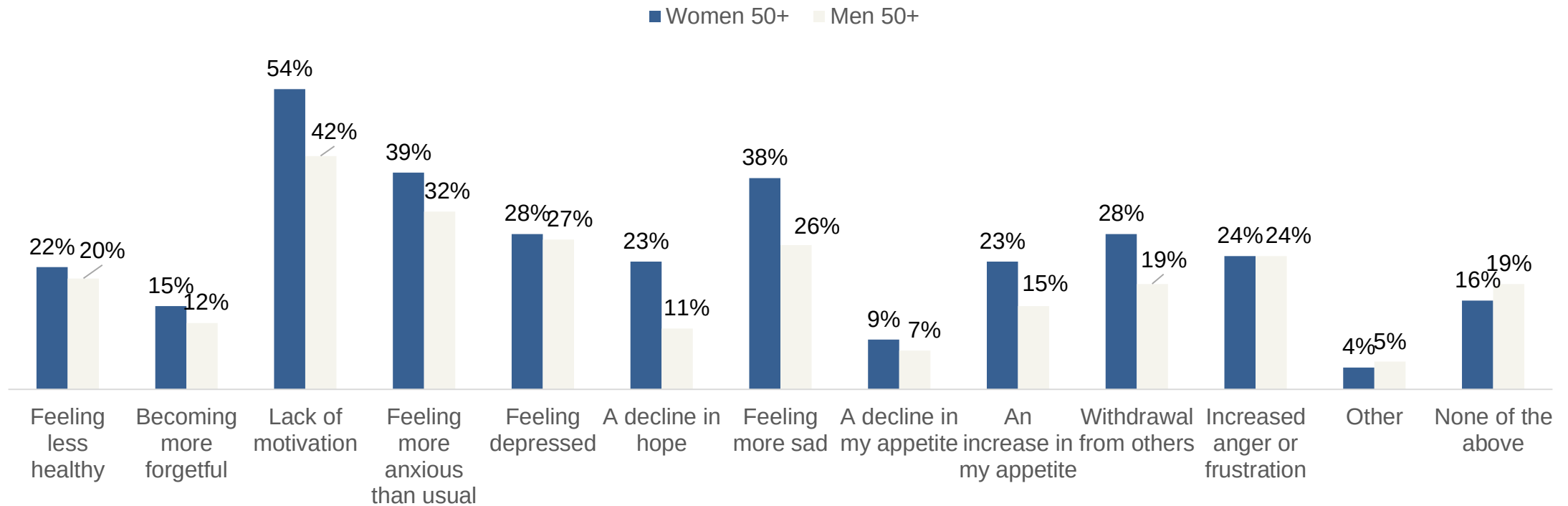
Thinking about the definition of social isolation that you just read, to what extent have you or a loved one experienced social isolation since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic? (N=469 Men 50+, N=516 Women 50+).

And again regardless of gender, more than half of adults 50+ report that a loved one has experienced social isolation

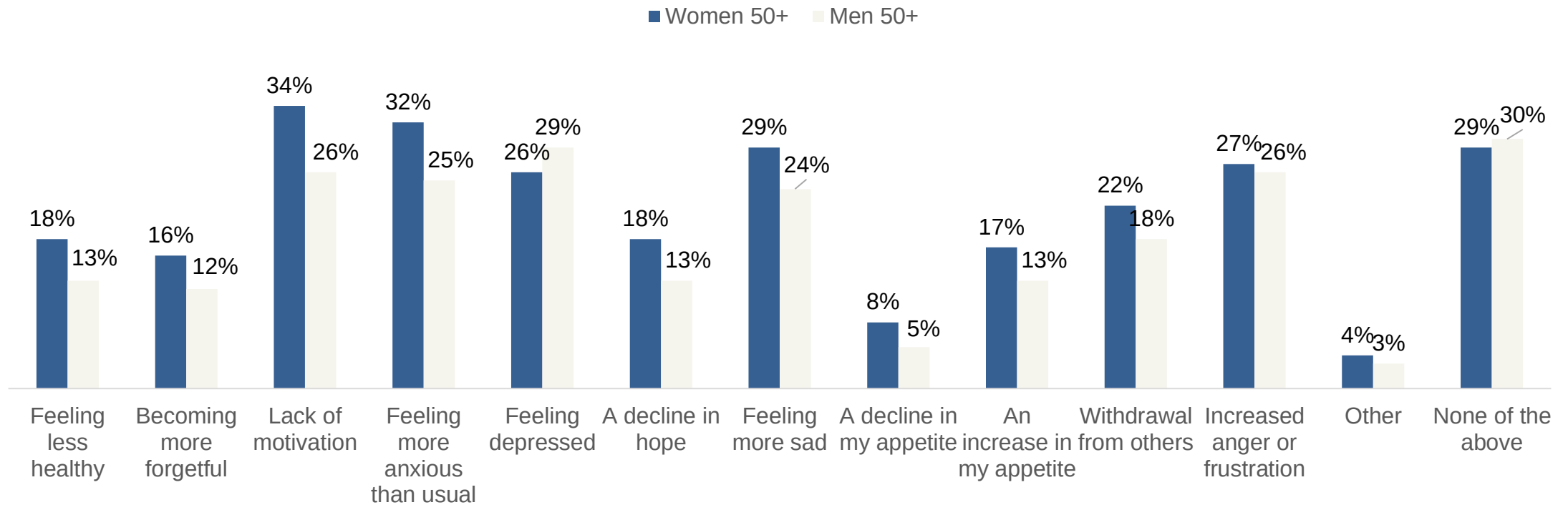


Thinking about the definition of social isolation that you just read, to what extent have you or a loved one experienced social isolation since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic? (N=469 Men 50+, N=516 Women 50+).

**Among the 50+ who are experiencing social isolation, women are more likely than men to say the pandemic has caused them to feel a lack of motivation, more anxious than usual, and more sad**

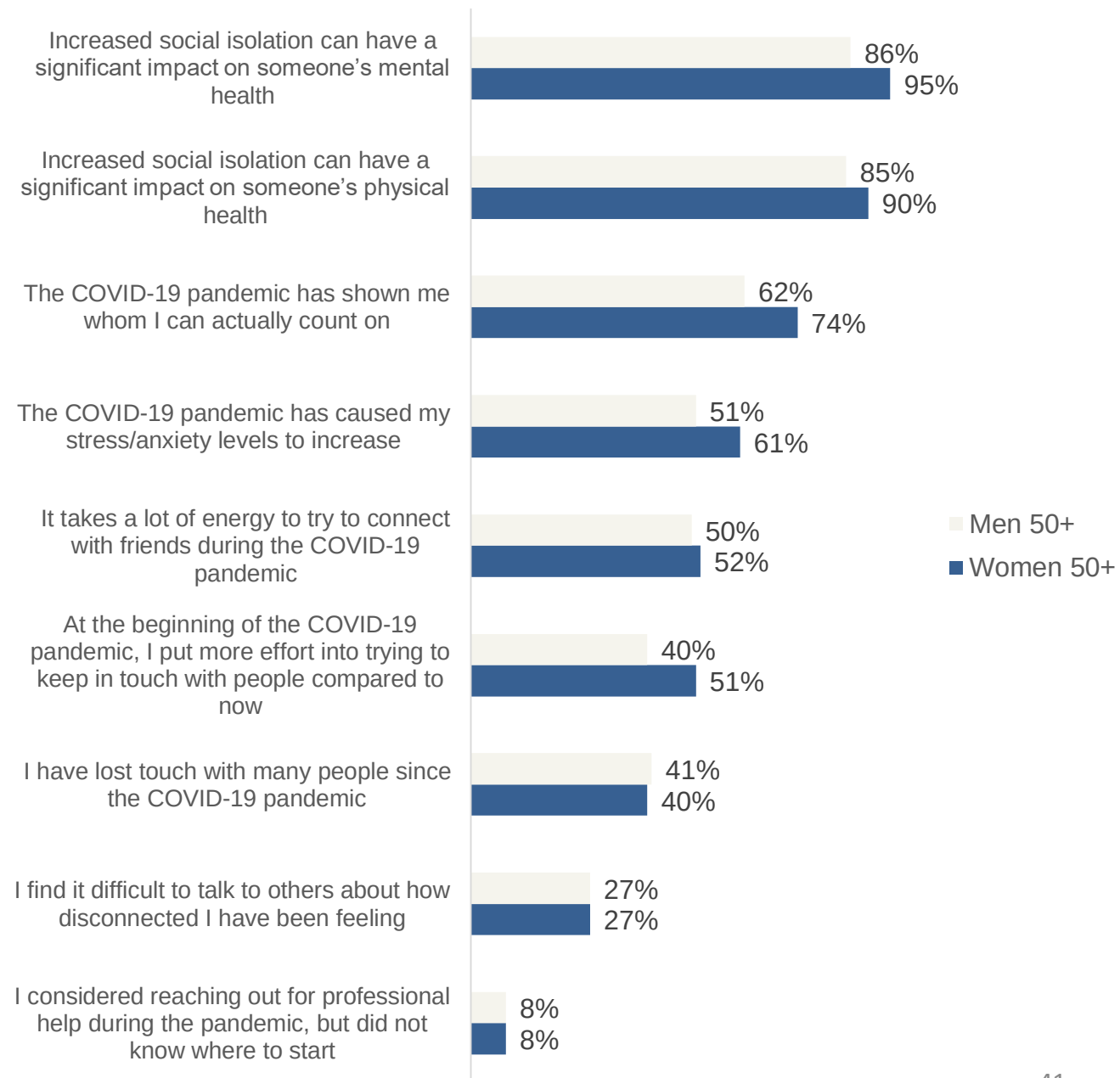


## Women 50+ are slightly more likely than men 50+ to observe that their loved ones who have experienced social isolation lack motivation and feel more anxious than usual



*Because of social isolation, what kind of changes have you seen in your loved one? Please select all that apply.*  
(N=265 Men 50+, N=330 Women 50+).

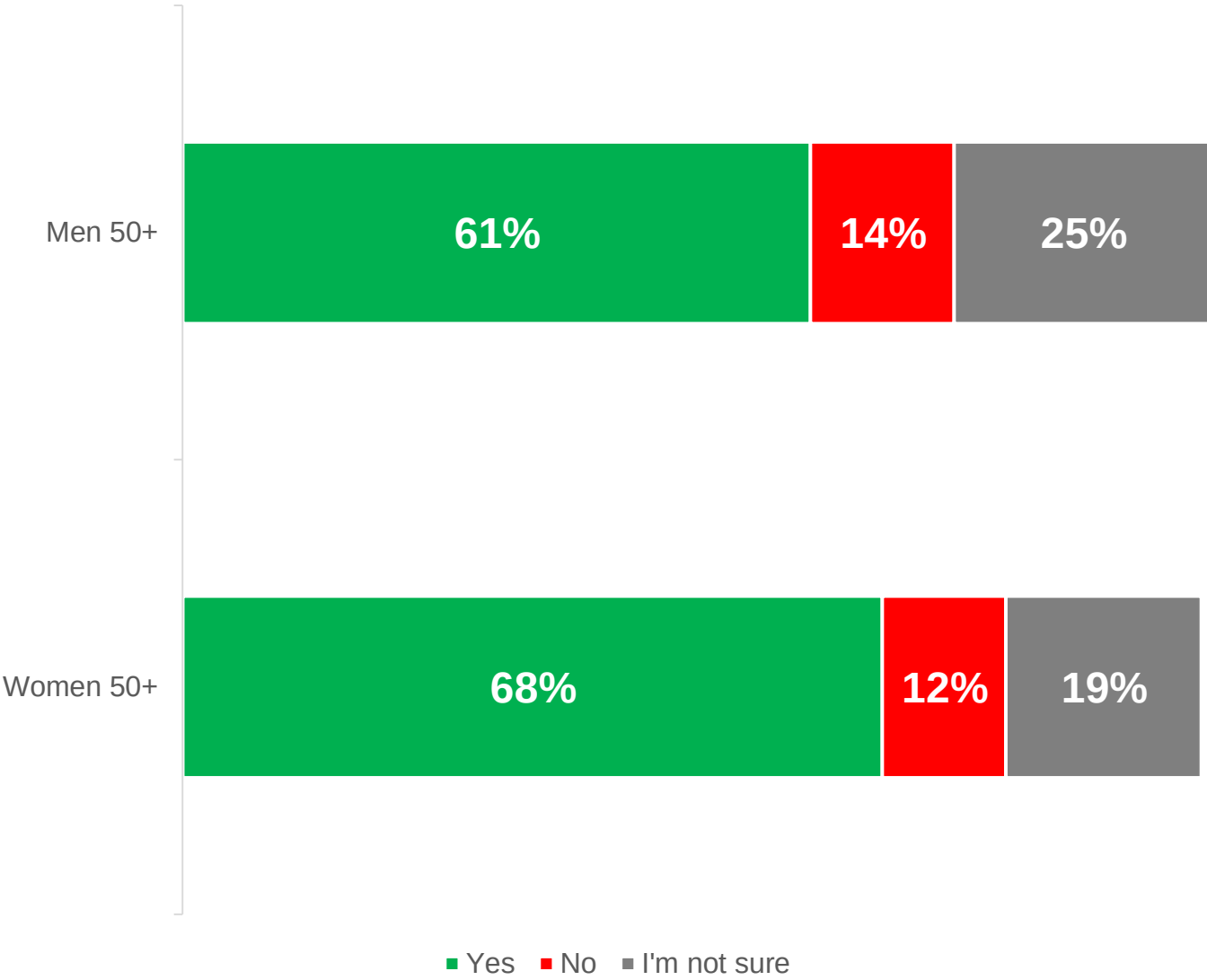
## Among the 50+, more women than men know that social isolation can have an impact on someone's mental or physical health



*Note: Data in chart reflects respondents who strongly agree or somewhat agree with each statement.*

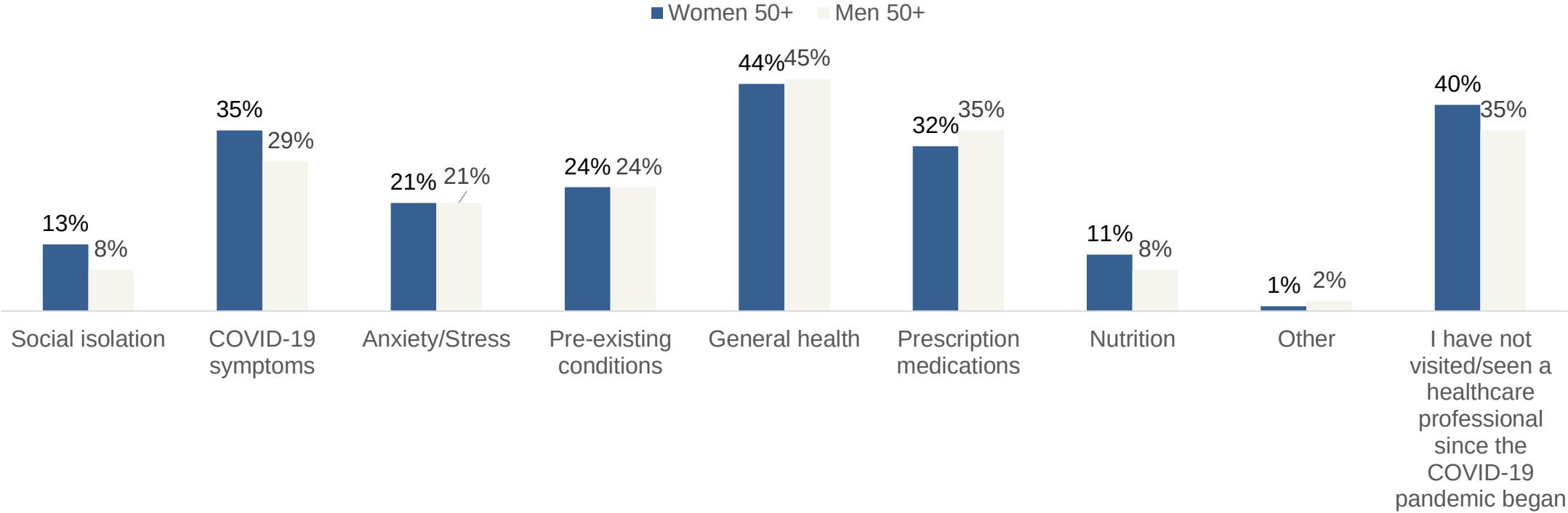
*To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
(N=469 Men 50+, N=516 Women 50+).*

Among the 50+, more women than men are aware of the specific impact social isolation can have on someone's physical health, like increased risk of heart disease, high blood pressure or sleep disorders



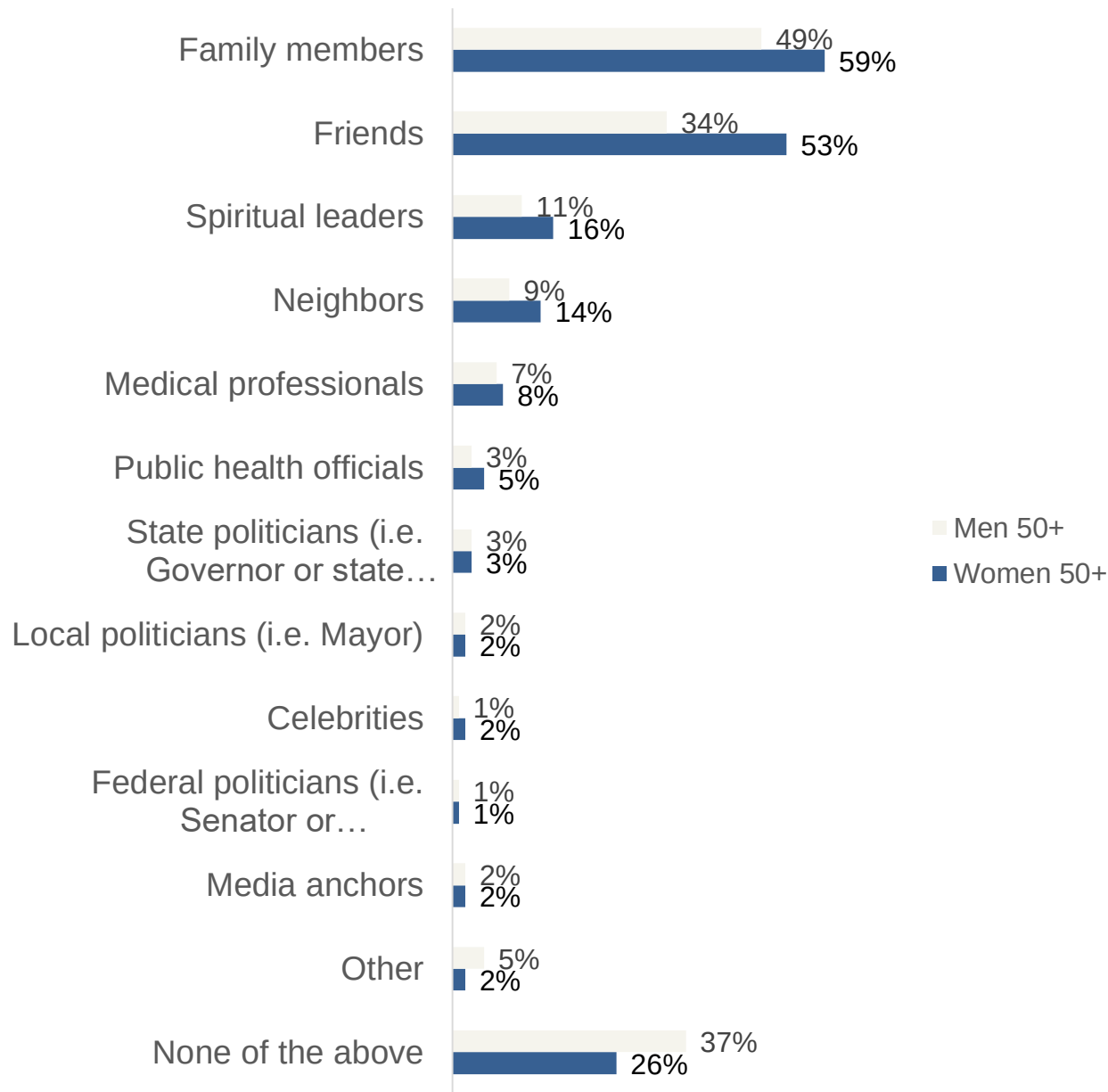
*Do you think that social isolation can increase your risk for health conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure or sleep disorders? (N=469 Men 50+, N=516 Women 50+).*

# Women 50+ are slightly more likely to report a healthcare professional asking about social isolation on a recent visit since the start of the pandemic



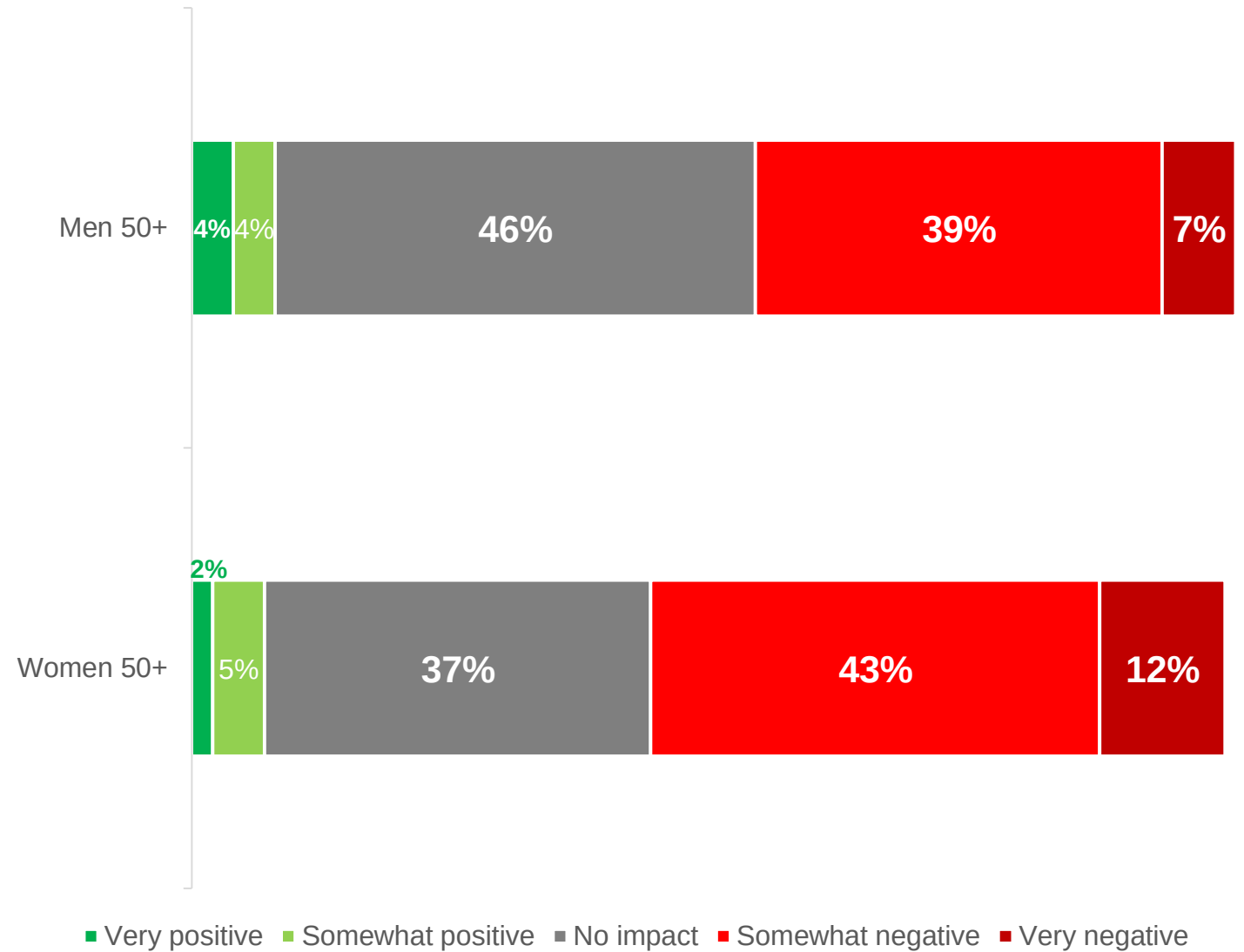
Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, has a healthcare professional asked you about any of the following during an in-person or virtual visit? Please select all that apply. (N=469 Men 50+, N=516 Women 50+).

**Among adults 50+,  
more women than men  
are likely to look to  
people around them  
(i.e. family members or  
friends) when they've  
felt down or sad over  
the course of the  
COVID-19 pandemic**



Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, some people may have experienced times when they felt down or sad. At times when you might have felt down or sad, what type of people have you looked to for hope? Please select all that apply. (N=469 Men 50+, N=516 Women 50+).

**And overall, women 50+ are slightly more likely to say their mental well-being will be negatively impacted if social distancing guidelines continue to be in place during the winter holidays**

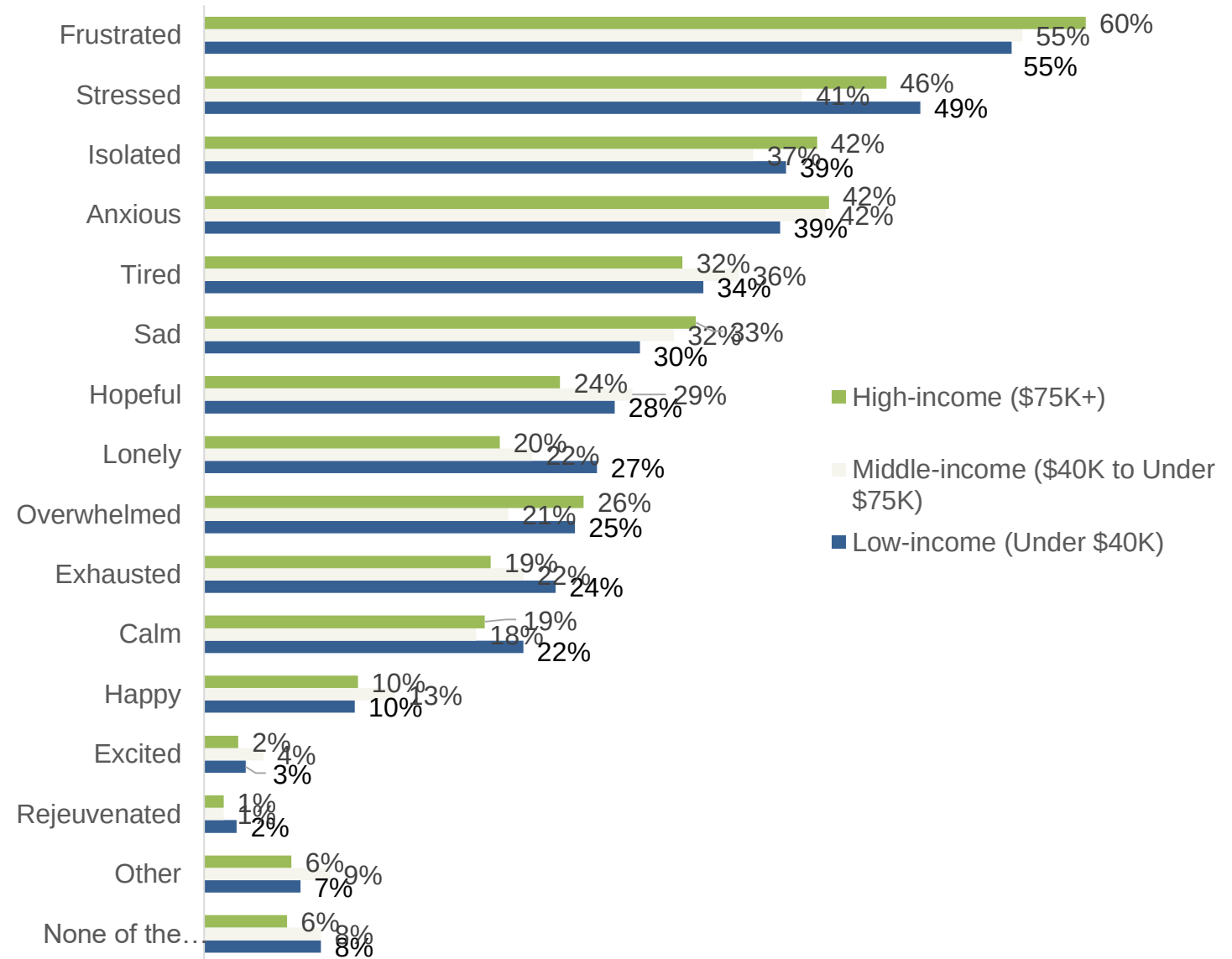


*Thinking about the future, if we continue to have social-distancing guidelines during the winter holidays (i.e. Thanksgiving), what impact do you foresee it having on your mental well-being? (N=469 Men 50+, N=516 Women 50+).*

**50+  
BY  
INCOME**

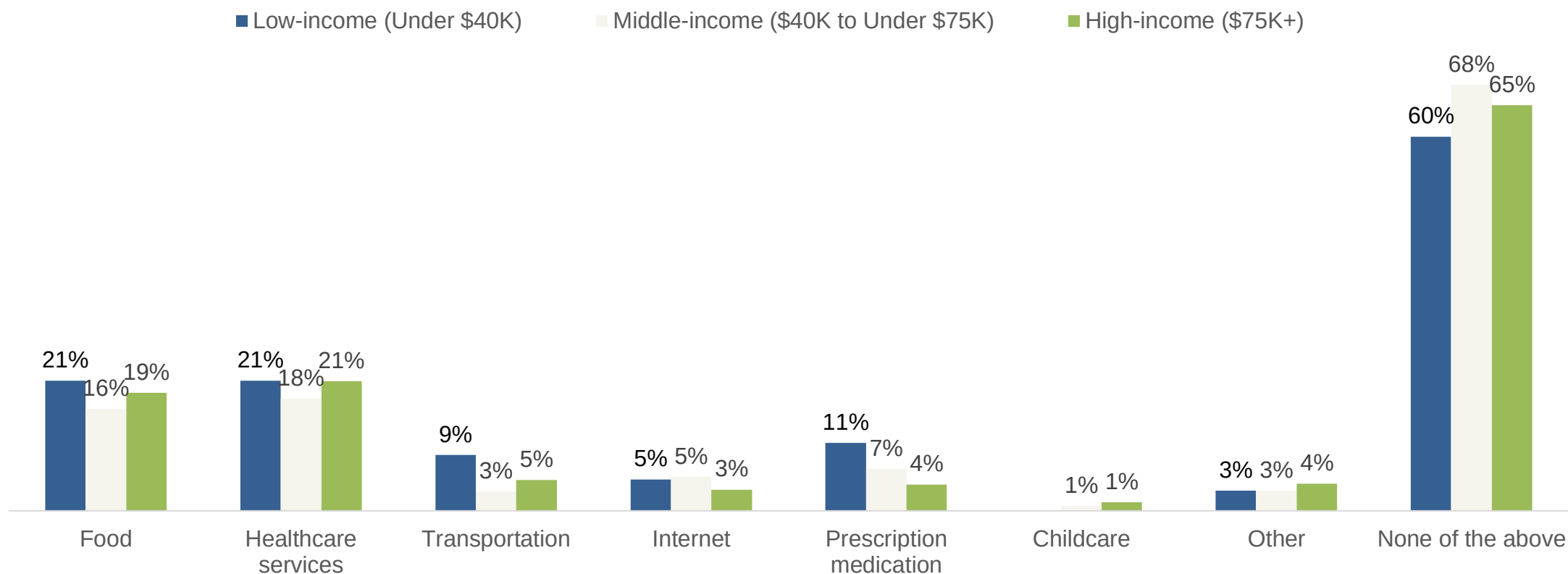


## Among adults 50+, more low-income adults and high-income adults report feeling stressed than middle- income adults



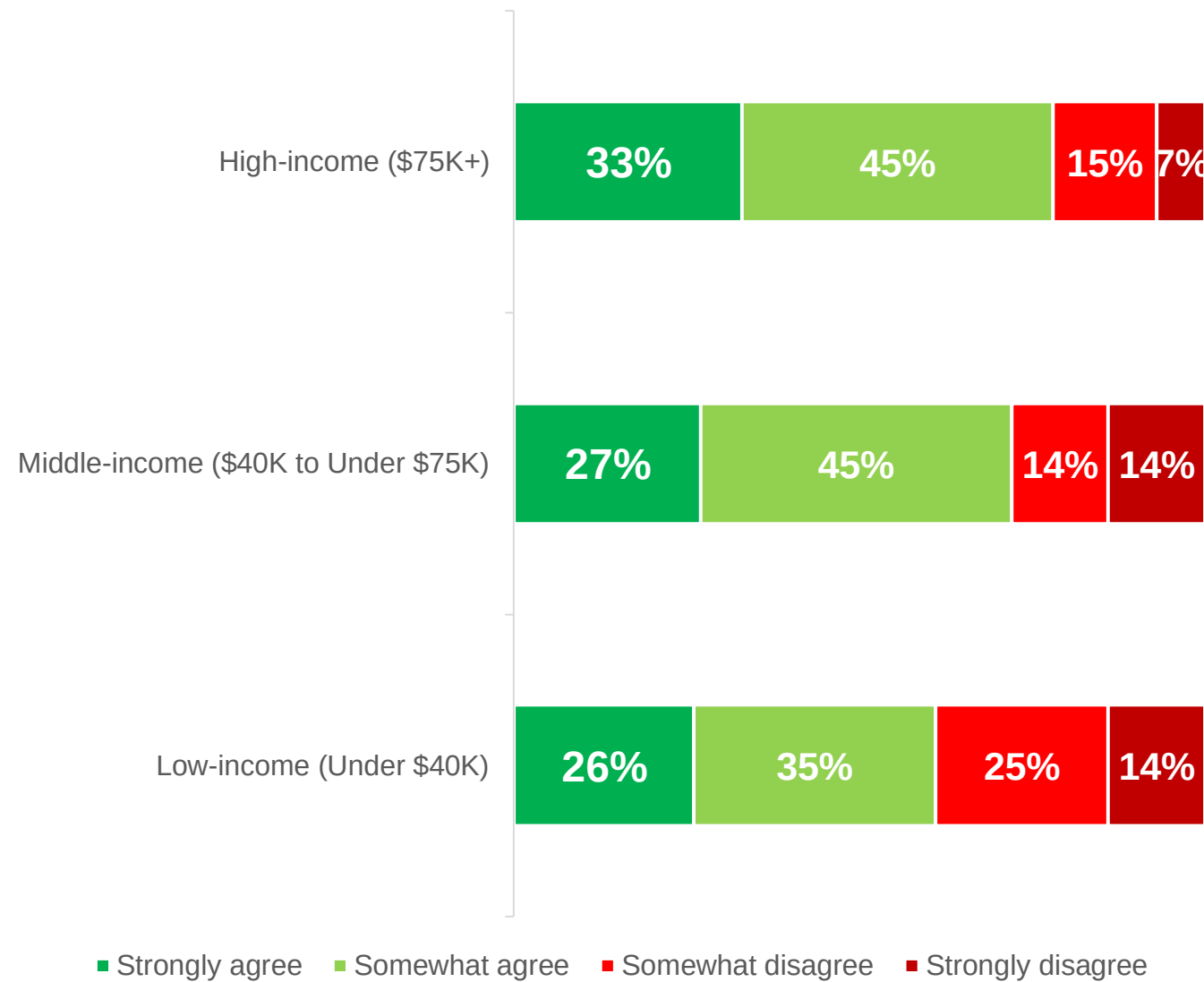
Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, which of the following emotions have you felt? Please select all that apply.  
(N=355 age 50+ with income \$75K+, N=289 age 50+ with income \$40K-under \$75K, N=341 age 50+ with income under \$40K).

# Four in 10 low-income adults 50+ report facing challenges accessing various resources during COVID-19, including a fifth who had challenges accessing food and a similar number who had challenges with healthcare services



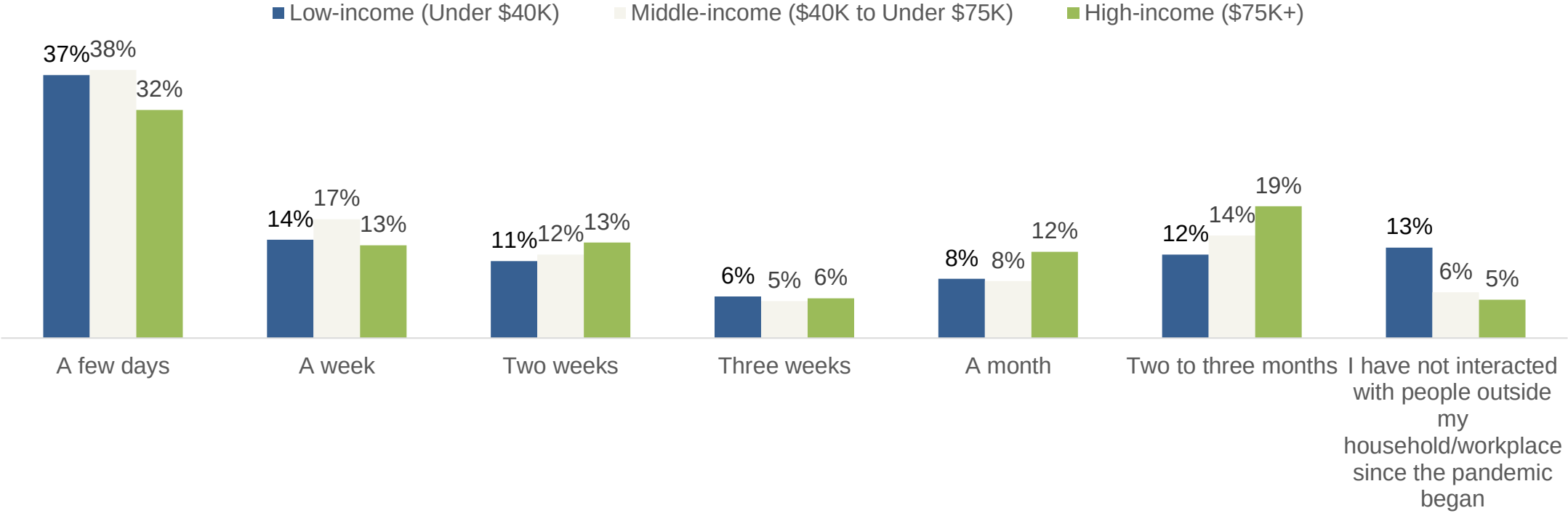
Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, have you had challenges when trying to access any of the following? Please select all that apply.  
(N=355 age 50+ with income \$75K+, N=289 age 50+ with income \$40K-under \$75K, N=341 age 50+ with income under \$40K).

## Adults 50+ with income levels above \$40,000 are more likely to report that it has been difficult to connect with friends during the pandemic



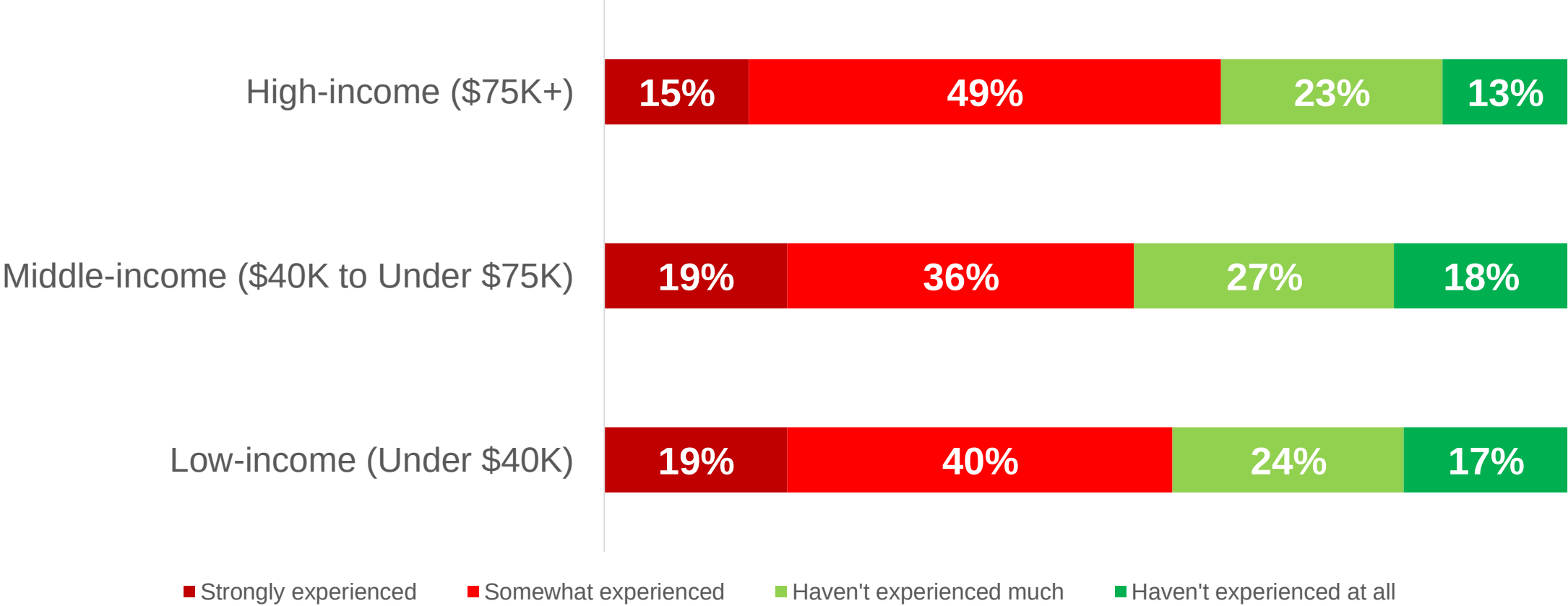
Thinking about your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The pandemic has made it more difficult for me to connect with friends. (N=355 age 50+ with income \$75K+, N=289 age 50+ with income \$40K-under \$75K, N=341 age 50+ with income under \$40K).

# And more adults 50+ with low-income report that they have not interacted with people outside their household/workplace since the pandemic began



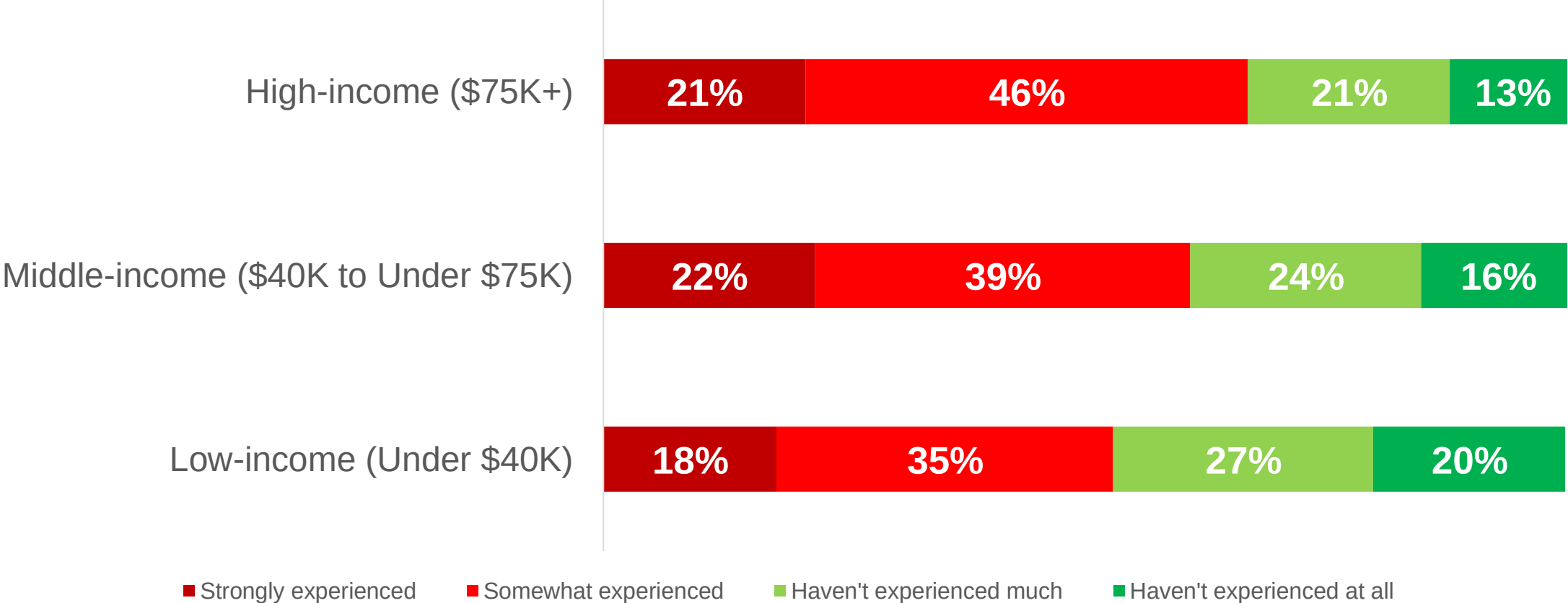
Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, what is the longest time you have gone without interacting with other people outside of your household and your workplace? (N=355 age 50+ with income \$75K+, N=289 age 50+ with income \$40K-under \$75K, N=341 age 50+ with income under \$40K).

# Almost six in 10 adults 50+ with low-income report experiencing social isolation



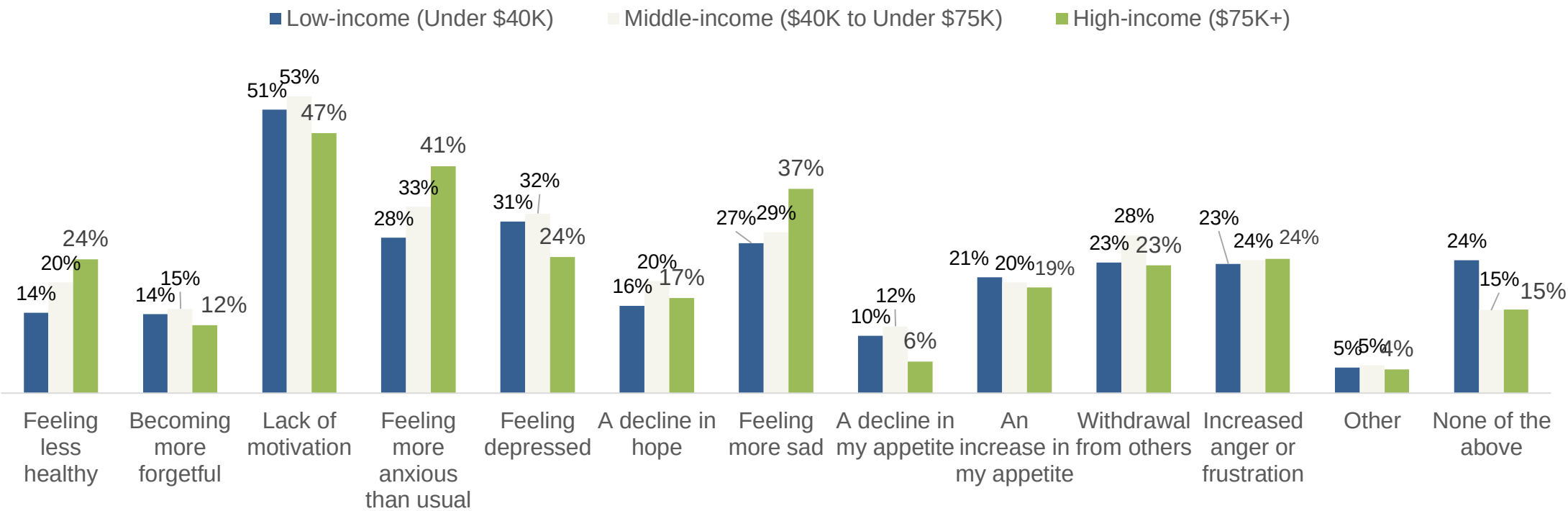
Thinking about the definition of social isolation that you just read, to what extent have you or a loved one experienced social isolation since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic? (N=355 age 50+ with income \$75K+, N=289 age 50+ with income \$40K-under \$75K, N=341 age 50+ with income under \$40K).

And slightly more than half of adults 50+ who have low-income report observing a loved one experiencing social isolation

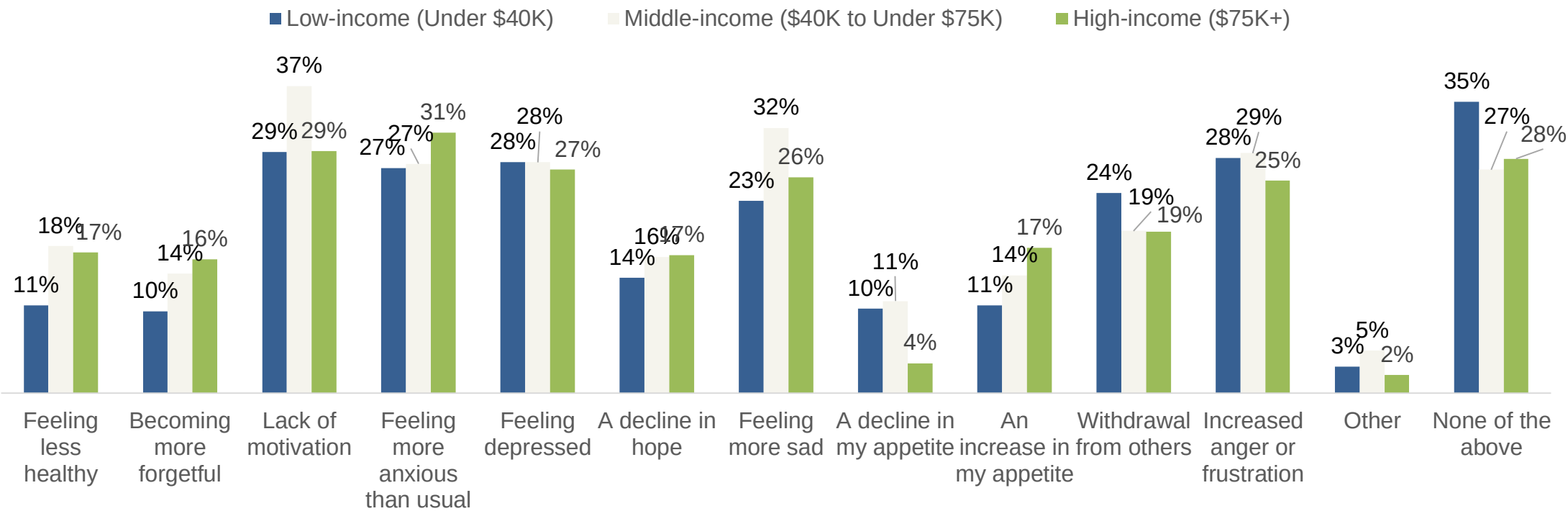


Thinking about the definition of social isolation that you just read, to what extent have you or a loved one experienced social isolation since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic? (N=355 age 50+ with income \$75K+, N=289 age 50+ with income \$40K-under \$75K, N=341 age 50+ with income under \$40K).

Adults 50+ with low- and middle-income who have experienced social isolation are more likely to report feeling depressed compared to adults 50+ with high-income

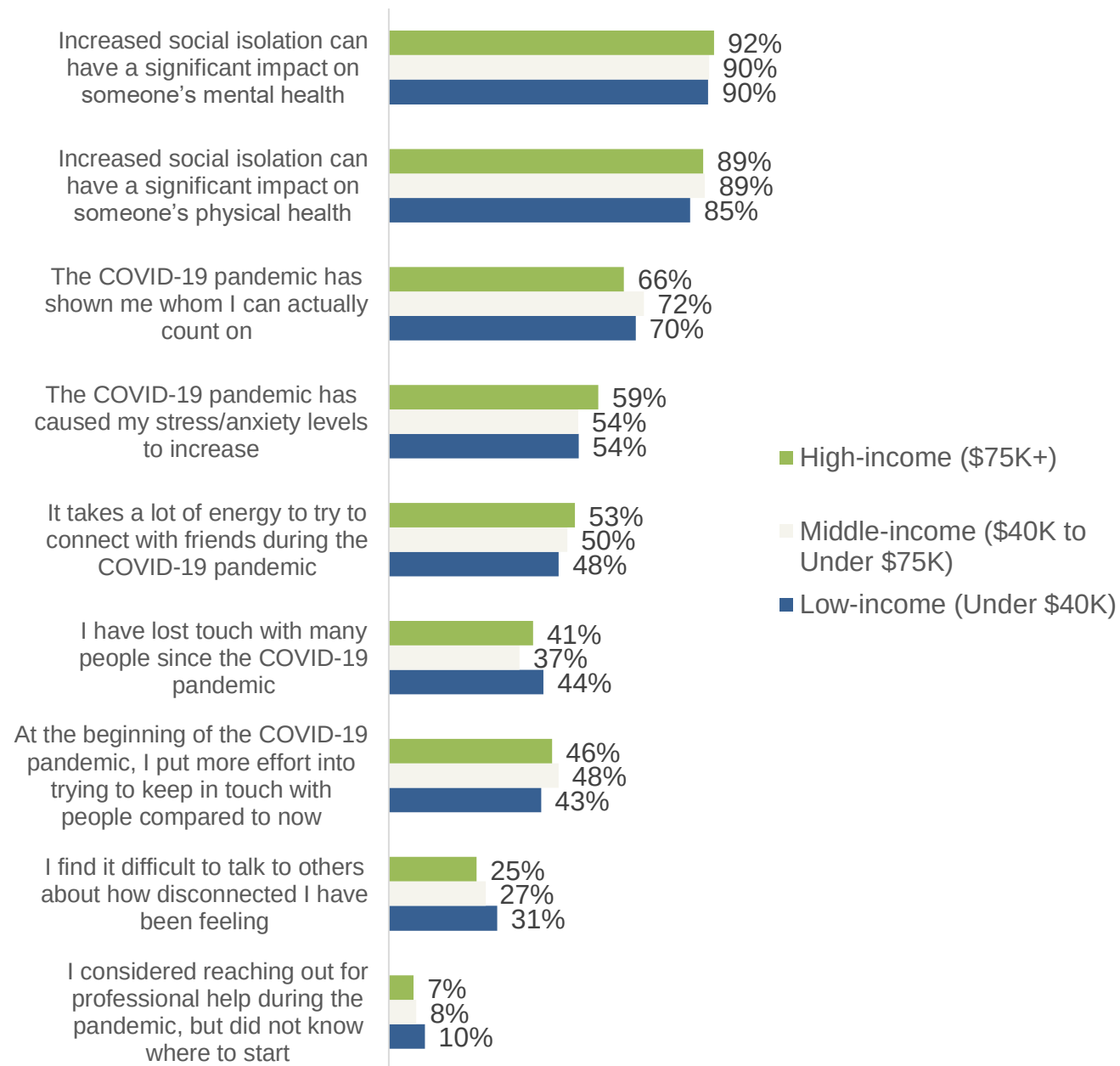


Adults 50+ with middle-income who have seen a loved one experience social isolation are more likely to report that they’ve noticed a lack of motivation and an increase in sadness



Because of social isolation, what kind of changes have you seen in your loved one? Please select all that apply. (N=239 age 50+ with income \$75K+, N=170 age 50+ with income \$40K-under \$75K, N=186 age 50+ with income under \$40K).

## Adults 50+, no matter their household income, agree that social isolation can have a significant impact on someone's mental or physical health



*Note: Data in chart reflects respondents who strongly agree or somewhat agree with each statement.*

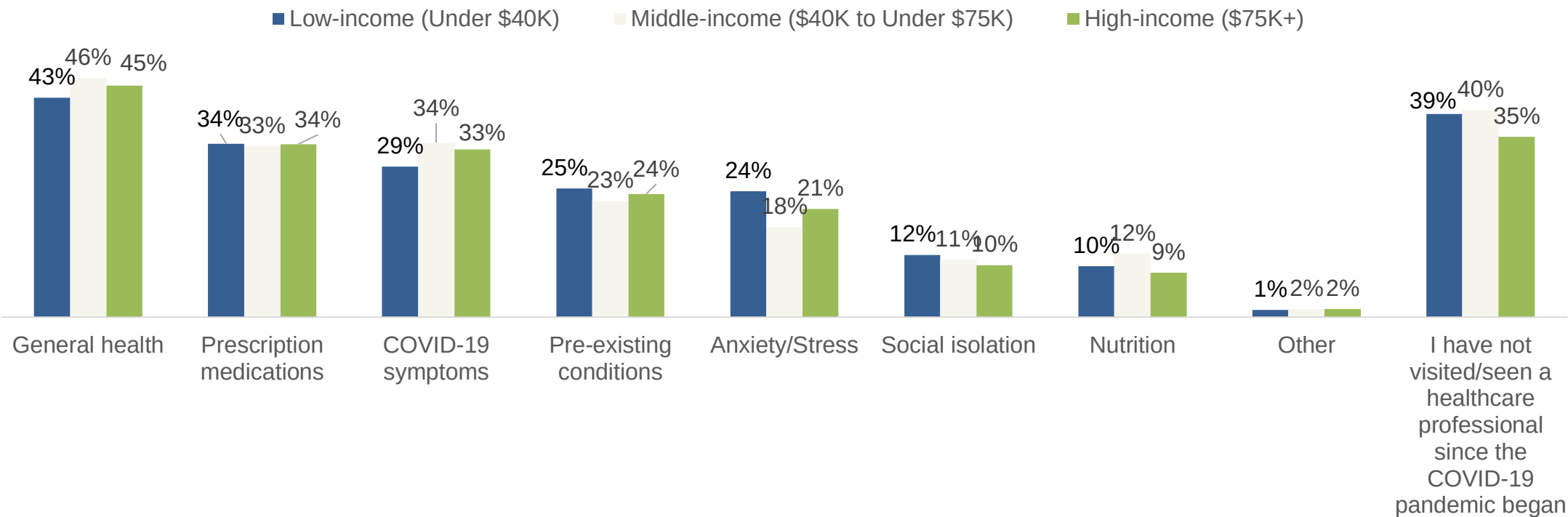
*To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (N=355 age 50+ with income \$75K+, N=289 age 50+ with income \$40K-under \$75K, N=341 age 50+ with income under \$40K).*

**Adults 50+ with low-income are less likely than those with medium- or high-income to be aware of the specific impact social isolation can have on one's physical health, like increased risk of heart disease, high blood pressure or sleep disorders**



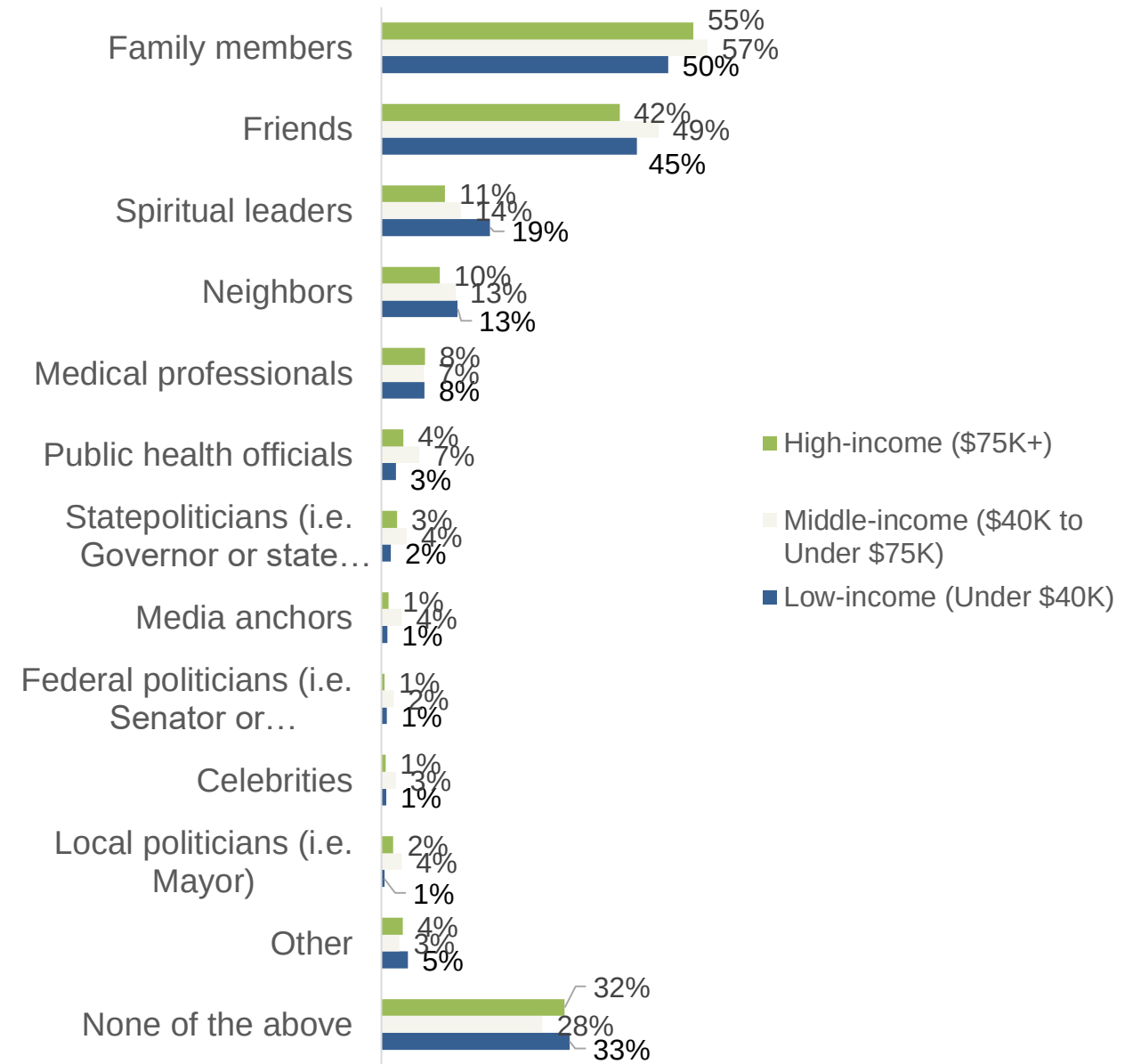
*Do you think that social isolation can increase your risk for health conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure or sleep disorders?  
(N=355 age 50+ with income \$75K+, N=289 age 50+ with income \$40K-under \$75K, N=341 age 50+ with income under \$40K).*

Regardless of income level, only about one in 10 adults 50+ report that their doctor has asked them about social isolation during a recent visit since the start of the pandemic



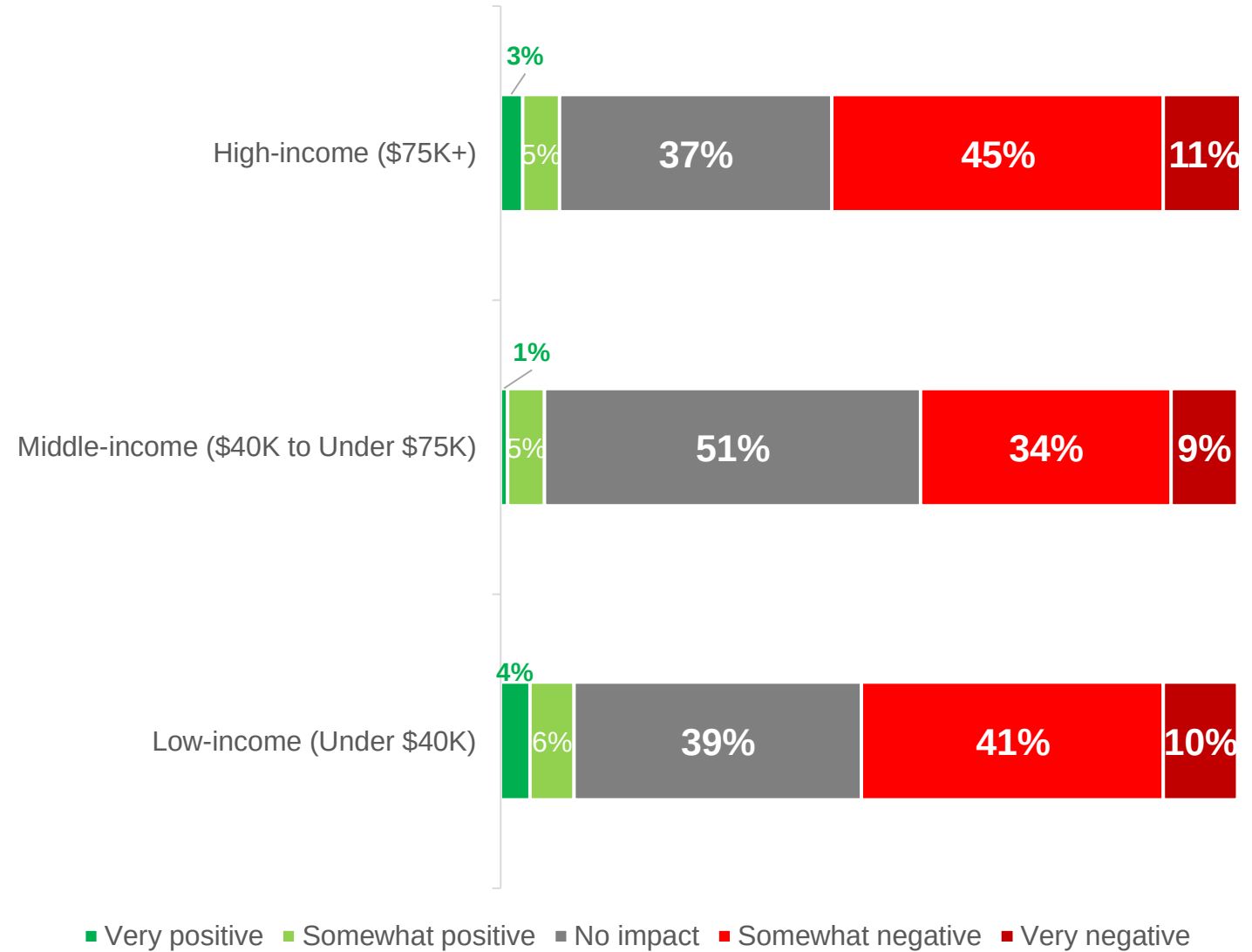
Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, has a healthcare professional asked you about any of the following during an in-person or virtual visit? Please select all that apply. (N=355 age 50+ with income \$75K+, N=289 age 50+ with income \$40K-under \$75K, N=341 age 50+ with income under \$40K).

**Regardless of income level,  
around three in 10 adults 50+  
do not look to those listed  
when they've felt down or sad**



Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, some people may have experienced times when they felt down or sad. At times when you might have felt down or sad, what type of people have you looked to for hope? Please select all that apply. (N=355 age 50+ with income \$75K+, N=289 age 50+ with income \$40K-under \$75K, N=341 age 50+ with income under \$40K).

**Adults 50+ with high and low-income are slightly more likely to report a negative impact on their mental well-being if social distancing guidelines continue into the winter holiday season**



*Thinking about the future, if we continue to have social-distancing guidelines during the winter holidays (i.e. Thanksgiving), what impact do you foresee it having on your mental well-being? (N=355 age 50+ with income \$75K+, N=289 age 50+ with income \$40K-under \$75K, N=341 age 50+ with income under \$40K).*



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