

**Submission  
No 14**

## **INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Organisation:** Heart On My Sleeve Movement Ltd

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**Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales**

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## Introduction

Heart On My Sleeve is dedicated to leading a global cultural movement around mental health conversations. Our mission aligns closely with the objectives of this inquiry as we work to foster a world where people feel empowered to say, "I'm not OK" and are met with understanding and support. We appreciate the opportunity to contribute our perspective on the prevalence, causes, and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales, as well as strategies to reduce its effects on individuals and communities.

## Summary Position

### **Our Approach to Reducing Loneliness and Social Isolation**

Heart On My Sleeve's primary focus is on creating resources, content, and campaigns to encourage open and authentic conversations about mental health. We believe that when people are supported in speaking their truth, they are less likely to feel isolated and more likely to seek meaningful connections. To this end, our unique strengths are:

1. We are a social-led movement and a leader in using social channels to help people feel connected virtually to a community.
2. Audience tracking data indicates that our brand & social-led approach resonates with a younger demographic who are key influencers of our future culture.

Our initiatives include:

1. **Social Media Content & Campaigns:** We actively share content on social media designed to drive a cultural shift in how people talk about mental health. By addressing loneliness and mental health issues openly, we aim to normalize these conversations and foster a sense of community.
2. **Emotional Authenticity Symbols:** Through our tattoo program and apparel line, featuring our heart symbol logo, we encourage individuals to associate this symbol with emotional authenticity. These symbols function as conversation starters and serve as visual reminders of solidarity, reducing barriers for those who may feel isolated.
3. **Educational Courses & eLearning Resources:** We provide free resources to equip people with the skills and confidence to speak openly about their mental health challenges. Our eLearning offerings include practical tools for individuals and their supporters, contributing directly to the objectives outlined in Terms of Reference (b), (e), and (j).
4. **Annual Media Campaigns:** We launch media campaigns to reach more people and provide them with tools to navigate their mental health challenges. This outreach supports widespread access to resources for those most vulnerable to loneliness.
5. **Stigma reduction/elimination strategies:** Largely through modelling and storytelling, we consistently highlight the importance of actively reducing

barriers to expression, specifically shame (internal/external stigma) which is a key factor that prevents people from speaking authentically about their emotions and seeking help during times of adversity, namely periods of loneliness.

## TERMS OF REFERENCE

### (a) The extent of loneliness and social isolation in NSW and how this is measured and recorded

Accurate data is essential for understanding the scale of loneliness in New South Wales. Heart On My Sleeve recommends a community-based approach to data collection, which includes feedback loops from charities like ours that work directly with affected populations. Enhanced data collection methods, such as anonymous digital surveys and social media sentiment analysis, could yield insights into areas where loneliness is most prevalent.

### (b) Identification of populations most at risk of loneliness and social isolation

Our experience indicates that young people, particularly those who feel socially disconnected or are struggling with mental health issues, are especially vulnerable to loneliness. Other high-risk groups include the elderly, people with disabilities, those in regional areas, and individuals experiencing grief. We believe targeted interventions, including digital outreach and community support programs, are vital to address these vulnerabilities.

### (c) Evidence of the psychological and physiological impacts of loneliness

Research has consistently shown that loneliness exacerbates mental health issues, which in turn have physiological repercussions. Through our engagement with various communities, we witness firsthand how loneliness can lead to increased anxiety, depression, and even cardiovascular issues. Our programs aim to intervene by encouraging connection and authenticity, reducing the psychological and physiological toll of loneliness.

### (d) Evidence linking social connection to physical health

We support the growing body of evidence that indicates a strong correlation between social connection and physical well-being. Our advocacy encourages people to build meaningful connections, thereby improving their overall health outcomes.

#### (e) Factors contributing to the development of transient loneliness into chronic loneliness

Transient feelings of loneliness are a natural part of the human experience; however, without adequate support, they can develop into chronic loneliness. Heart On My Sleeve's work addresses this by fostering environments where individuals feel safe to share their vulnerabilities. We encourage community and belonging through our campaigns and resources, which promote resilience and prevent transient loneliness from becoming chronic.

#### (f) The financial costs of loneliness to the NSW budget and the state economy

Loneliness has considerable economic costs, affecting healthcare, social services, and workforce productivity. By reducing loneliness, we can alleviate these financial burdens on the state. Our programs empower individuals to seek help early, which can reduce the need for intensive services later.

#### (g) Identification of existing initiatives by government and non-government organisations

We applaud the current initiatives to reduce loneliness, but more can be done. We suggest a thorough cost-benefit analysis to promote effective, existing programs that are consistently meeting success metrics and remove programs that are not meeting expectations, so that resources can be directed towards programs which are shown to have the most impact.

Heart On My Sleeve believes in the power of public-private partnerships to address loneliness as a public health issue and is eager to collaborate with other organisations to amplify this mission.

#### (h) Developments in other jurisdictions regarding the implementation of policies and initiatives relevant to the treatment of loneliness as a public health issue

We have observed successful programs internationally that treat loneliness as a public health concern. Initiatives such as the UK's Campaign to End Loneliness demonstrate the benefits of a coordinated approach, integrating government support with local outreach. We recommend similar efforts in New South Wales, adapted to our specific community needs.

#### (i) Steps the state government can take to reduce the prevalence and impacts of loneliness

To tackle loneliness effectively, we recommend that the NSW Government:

- Support community-based initiatives and campaigns that encourage people to express their feelings openly.

- Leverage the growing reach of social media channels to help people feel connected to a virtual community through social-led storytelling, educations and engaging with social content.
- Increase our focus on younger audiences as key influencers to shape our future culture by inspiring them to have open conversations about mental health and educating them on the power of connection through the many different channels that are available.
- Partner with organisations like ours to implement training programs aimed at improving emotional communication skills in both individuals and professionals.
- Invest in digital infrastructure that facilitates connection among vulnerable populations, particularly in remote areas.

#### (j) Steps that community, technology/social media companies, organisations, and individuals can take

We call upon social media companies, community organizations, and individuals to play their part in reducing loneliness. Social media can be a powerful tool for fostering connections when used thoughtfully. We encourage the responsible use of digital platforms to create inclusive and supportive online communities, leveraging symbols like our heart logo to promote conversations around authenticity and connection.

We also acknowledge that there is some responsibility on the individual. Our hope is that we can equip them with conversation practices that will give them the confidence and competence to either speak up when they're struggling or be there to support someone else who is.

#### Conclusion

Heart On My Sleeve is committed to helping the NSW government combat loneliness by fostering a culture of openness and support. We welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the Standing Committee on Social Issues to create lasting change. Through collective action, we believe we can build a society where everyone feels empowered to share their truth and connect with others.

**Submission on behalf of the board members of,**

**Heart On My Sleeve**

**A mental health charity**